

Out of Darkness and Death

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 September 2018

Preacher: Shawn Woo

[0 : 00] Psalm 88. It's not one that many people are familiar with, but it's a great psalm. The subtitle of the psalm says, A Psalm of the Sons of Korah to the Choir Master according to Mahalath Leonath, the Maskell of Heman the Ezraite.

It's obviously a song that they wrote for worship. Let me read it out loud for us. O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you.

Let my prayer come before you. Incline your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of troubles and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the pit.

I am a man who has no strength. Like one set loose 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.

You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah. You have caused my companions to shun me.

[1 : 17] You have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape. My eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O Lord.

I spread out my hands to you. Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you, Selah? 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? But I, O Lord, cry to you.

In the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up.

I suffer your terrors. I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long. They close in on me together.

[2 : 15] You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me. My companions have become darkness. Isn't that a...

It's quite dark, right? And some of the people who have studied this psalm have had these things to say about it. One person says, It's the saddest psalm in the whole Psalter. Another person says, It's unrelieved by a single ray of comfort or hope.

It's stark and lonely and pain-riddled. The psalmist is writing from a very dark place. And it teaches us that amidst kind of the distress and darkness of our lives that we must cry out to the God of our salvation.

And it's really divided into two main parts. You could divide it in multiple ways, but I'd like to divide it. So verses 1 through 9a, and then in my eyes grow dim through sorrow.

And then verses 9b to 18. And they kind of parallel each other. So it's got two halves that mirror each other. And in verses 1 to 2, the psalmist begins his prayer this way, Oh Lord God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you.

[3 : 29] Let my prayer come before you. Incline your ear to my cry. And the last word in verse 2, cry, is it's not just kind of this, you know, formal kind of prayer petitioning God or in a dignified way.

It refers to wailing. You know, imagine someone wailing at a funeral. Or it's that kind of crying out, desperate cry to God. And that's how he's crying out. And that's, and he's not praying for, you know, like two minutes a day and then going about his business.

He says he's praying day and night, right? And that's not, that doesn't mean that he's praying, you know, once during the day and then once during the night. Day and night is a literary device called merism, which includes everything in between.

So when you say heaven and earth, it doesn't mean that God created just the heaven and earth. It means he created the whole world, right? So here when he says day and night, that means he's

crying out all day long. He's, that's how desperate he is.

He's crying out to God. And that's paralleled in the second half of the Psalm by verses 9b to c, basically, where he says, every day I call upon you, O Lord. I spread out my hands to you.

[4 : 33] So not only is the Psalmist crying out all day long, he's also calling upon God every day, right? And then in verses 3 to 4, the Psalmist explains why he's crying out so desperately and persistently. He says, for my soul is full of troubles and my life draws near to Sheol.

I am counted among those who go down to the pit. I am a man who has no strength. So his soul is full, right? Not of blessings from God, but of troubles.

And his life is drawing near to Sheol, which is the realm of the dead, a name for the realm of the dead that parallels the pit. And we don't know exactly what the situation is. Maybe he's ravaged by war, being pursued by an enemy, or he's ill, has contracted maybe a potentially fatal illness.

We don't know. I think the Psalmist doesn't tell us because then it makes the application much more broader. But he is like a man who has no strength, like a valiant man in the battlefield who's totally spent.

He can't even raise his weapon. He can't take another step. He's just awaiting his inevitable death. That's the kind of image that's pictured here. Painted here is, I'm a man who has no strength.

[5 : 39] And that near-death experience of the Psalmist is paralleled by verses 10 to 11. It says, Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you, Selah?

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Abaddon is another name for the realm of the dead. So this parallel Sheol. And the Psalmist already knows the answer to this rhetorical question because in Psalm 115, 17, it says, The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence.

So this is not a statement about whether or not there's life after death or whether, you know, it's, for example, right, even Jesus used the Old Testament in Exodus 3, 6, where he says, God says to Moses, I am the God of your fathers.

I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, right? And he used that in Matthew 22 to prove to the Sadducees that, yes, there is a resurrection of the dead because God is not the God of the dead but God of the living.

So what he's referring to here is that God is the God of the living. It's those who are living who praise the Lord. It's those who, it's not the dead, they're not the ones that are praising God.

[6 : 46] So he's saying here, well, do you work wonders for the dead? Do they praise you? The answer is no. So then why, God, are you letting me go down to the grave like this? Why are you driving me to death?

Because that's not where I can praise you. That's not, you're not the God of the dead, you're the God of the living. And so he's experiencing this really death, but not just death, but he's experiencing darkness and forsakenness as well.

Because he says in verses 5 to 6, So he feels like a wounded soldier that's been deserted in the field of battle, right?

Or like a corpse in the grave. Like those whom God remembers no more in the region dark and deep. And that sense of forsakenness and darkness is paralleled in the second half by verses 12 to 14.

Are your wonders known in the darkness or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But I, O Lord, cry to you in the morning. My prayer comes before you, O Lord. Why do you cast my soul away?

[7 : 54] Why do you hide your face from me? So he feels like God has totally abandoned him and has forgotten him, has left him to the dark. He's in the place of darkness and forsakenness. And he believes that this is because of God's wrath upon him.

And so in verse 8, he says, Your wrath lies heavy upon me and you overwhelm me with all your waves. And then that's paralleled by verses 15 to 17. Afflicted and close to death from my youth up. I suffer your terrors. I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long. They close in on me together. So he's comparing the wrath of God that's coming upon him like this overwhelming waves, like the flood water that surrounds him.

And obviously here, you know, we haven't been as affected by Hurricane Florence. But even here, we've kind of seen some of the devastating effects of it. It was reduced to a tropical storm by the

time it got here.

But one of our sister churches, King of Grace, was still flooded. Their basement was flooded by the rain. And so it's just, that's how the psalmist feels. That sense of suffocating dread and helplessness of water just closing in on you and you know you're going to drown.

[9 : 02] That kind of feeling, that's how he feels like God himself is overwhelming him and attacking him. And not only does he feel abandoned by God, he's rejected by his closest friends and companions.

So verses eight to nine, it says, you have caused my companions to shun me. You have made me a horror to them. I'm shut in so that I cannot escape. My eyes grow dim through sorrow. Eyes growing dim represents not just the vision, losing vision, but the whole vitality and health of the body declining.

Usually it represents the health throughout scripture of the whole body. And that sense of being shunned is paralleled by verse 18. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me. My companions have become darkness. So usually at the end of a psalm of lament like this, there is, as we've seen, there's been going through the psalm for a while now, right?

Now we're in Psalm 88. Usually at the end of a psalm like this, there's an expression of faith and confidence. But I will trust in God. But this will happen.

[10 : 06] But in this psalm, it's really unique because there's nothing like that. It ends with the psalmist being shunned by his friends and feeling engulfed by the darkness.

It's a really depressing psalm. But isn't that how life is sometimes, right? Sometimes we don't see the silver lining when the clouds of our lives are looming over us, right?

Sometimes we don't see the light at the end of the tunnel. Life in this sinful, broken world does not always end with a happy ending. Sometimes suffering is followed by more suffering, one loss after another loss.

Sometimes the world adds insult to injury and we feel hopelessly broken down and want to give up. That's how a lot of people in this world feel. I think most of us in our church, we're more privileged than that.

We don't live in that kind of reality, but a lot of people in this world do. And to people who are living in such reality, this psalm, maybe even more than the psalms that offer those kinds of expressions of hope, has a powerful message, right, for them.

[11 : 06] Because what it's teaching us is that it doesn't give us theological pat answers, but it does tell us not to give up, right? Because as long as you're praying, right, as long as you're still crying out to God, you haven't given up all your hope.

You haven't given up all of your faith. Even though the entirety of the psalm is somber and dark, in the first verse, the psalmist still says, O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you, right?

He hasn't been saved yet, but he's nevertheless crying out to the God of my salvation. He still has hope. He still has faith. And his faith has been stretched, but hasn't been broken.

So even though he can't praise God for his circumstances right now, he still prays to God in the midst of his distress. And that really should teach us that even in the midst of darkness and distress in our lives, we should cry out to God and pray to Him and trust in Him.

And for us, obviously, as Christians, right, who have seen the fulfillment of God's salvation promise in Jesus Christ, we have all the more reason to keep the faith and trust God amidst the distress and darkness of our lives, right?

[12 : 15] As John 1, 5, right, said about the coming of Jesus, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it, right? Jesus is the light that has come into the world, into a dark world, and the darkness has not overcome Him.

And then 1 Corinthians 15, 56-57 says, the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, right?

That shows us, Jesus assures us that darkness will not ultimately prevail. The death will not have the final say in our lives. And we know this because Christ has died for our sins, paid for our sins, and He was raised from the dead victoriously, and then the defeated sin that He imparts to us eternal life and resurrection life.

So even after that, that's not the final say, but we'll be raised with Him in the end. And because of that, I think we have much more, a much stronger basis for hope and faith than this psalmist did as

we were praying.

And this is the hope that we can offer to people who are in the midst of distress and darkness. And really, it should be a motivator for us to evangelize as well because people who do not yet know Jesus, this is their world, whether they know it or not.

[13 : 27] They're living in death and darkness. They're dead to sin. They're dead in sin. They're trespassed in sin. So let's keep that in mind.

And then we're going to sing one more.