

SERIES: Psalms: Cries From the Heart
SERMON: *The Cry from the Depths*
SCRIPTURE: Psalm 88
SPEAKER: Pastor Dick High
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Introduction:

1969 was a time of social unrest in American history, focused primarily on our country's involvement in the Vietnam War. Among the highlights of the year we find:

- The inauguration of Richard Nixon as president.
- Woodstock occurred.
- The Boeing 747 recorded its first flight in February.
- The United States lands the first man on the moon – on July 21.
- Honeywell releases the H316 “Kitchen Computer,” the first home computer, priced at \$10,600 in the Neiman Marcus catalog.
- Sesame Street debuted on television.
- On June 15, Hee Haw debuted on television, a mid-year replacement for The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, a variety show that had been labeled as “subversive” by then Vice President Spiro Agnew.

One of the weekly bits on Hee Haw featured four poker-faced men who sang about trouble. **The refrain** of that song went like this: *Gloom, despair, and agony on me. Deep dark depression, excessive misery. If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all. Gloom, despair, and agony on me.*

Those words, interestingly, provide a fitting introduction to Psalm 88. Today we conclude our brief sermon series from Psalms. We do so by considering a Psalm that many consider the **saddest, most melancholy of all**.

I won't be reading sequentially through the Psalm, rather I will be looking through it thematically. For that reason I have chosen to put only selected verses on the screen. So I would encourage you as we proceed to have a Bible in hand open to this passage. Pew Bibles are available if you do not have one with you. You'll find the passage on page 422.

An Overview of Prominent Themes

The first theme that we encounter in this Psalm is prayer. Because we will address this in some detail later, I just want to identify and read the verses where this theme is found. Verses 1 & 2 – *O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.* Verse 9 (beginning in the middle of the verse) – *I call to you, O Lord, every day; I spread out my hands to you.* Verse 13 – *But I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you.*

What are the circumstances which give rise to this cry from the heart, this cry to God in prayer?

1. The Psalmist speaks out of a troubled soul. Verse 3a – *For my soul is full of trouble.*
 - a. Whatever is occurring is far beyond minor irritations.
 - b. This Psalm is a cry from the depths of one's being at a troubled time.
2. The Psalmist describes their situation as being near death. Verse 3b – *and my life draws near the grave.* Verse 4a – *I am counted among those who go down to the pit.* Verse 5a – *I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave...* Verses 10-12 – *Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness*

in Destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion? Verse 15a – From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death.

- a. We are not given enough information to know if this is literal or figurative.
 - b. Regardless, either is a difficult place to be.
3. The Psalmist states that they are without strength. Verse 4b – *I am like a man without strength.*
 4. The Psalmist relates their sense of being forgotten, rejected, and isolated; by and from both God and man – Verse 5b – *whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.* Verse 8a – *You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them.* Verse 14 – *Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?* Verse 18a – *You have taken my companions and loved ones from me...*
 5. In verse 6 the Psalms describes their situation as being in a pit – *You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depth.* Verse 18b – *the darkness is my closest friend.*
 6. The Psalmist is also aware of and overwhelmed by a sense of God’s wrath. Verse 7 – *Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.* Verses 15b-17 – *I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have surrounded me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.*
 7. Finally, the Psalmist expresses a sense of being trapped, with no place to go. Verses 8b & 9a – *I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief.*

This is certainly a somber message – yet it will be worth our time to probe this Psalm. If you had to put a face to this Psalm, what would it look like? You are likely familiar with smiley faces. Have you ever tried to take a smiley face and ascribe a serious or somber mood to it? That would look something like this. I just don’t think they look distressed enough to convey what is expressed in this Psalm! (I could not find a picture that would adequately express what I observe in this Psalm.)

Potential Circumstances and Authors

As we proceed, let’s begin by asking a question. Is there anything that we can learn about the circumstances and/or author behind this Psalm that will be instructive? In a number of the Psalms the heading provides helpful background information. Is that the case here?

This Psalm does have a fairly extensive heading. “A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah. For the director of music. According to *mahalath leannoth* (possibly a tune or title: The Suffering of Affliction). *A maskil* (possibly a musical term) of Heman the Ezrahite.

Unfortunately there is no definitive conclusion to be drawn from this heading. While the Sons of Korah are attributed with writing other Psalms, there is difficulty in a precise identification of these individuals. Numbers 16 does relate the account of a man from the tribe of Levi, named Korah, who spearheaded an insurrection against Moses’ leadership. The ultimate outcome was that the Lord caused the earth to split apart beneath Korah and his followers, and they were swallowed up; they just disappeared. Not everyone in Korah’s family participated in this insurrection, so these individuals called the Sons of Korah are likely from that lineage. It appears that their interest in sacred song and music arose out of organization which originated in David’s time as momentum grew to centralize and formalize worship in Jerusalem. (By the way, some consider that Heman is within in this lineage.)

That information itself does not give us reason for their production of this Psalm, especially when you compare the other Psalms which are attributed to them (Psalm 42; 44; 45; 46; 47, etc.). Those are much more what I would consider as “up-beat” and praise focused. The only potential background that could relate to this Psalm would have been their reflection upon their distant heritage, and grieving over the actions of Korah, their namesake. But that is only speculative.

In the absence of any clear assistance in determining the background of this Psalm from its heading, other suggestions have been offered. (One, tongue in cheek, suggested that Heman was from somewhere down in Tennessee. This was by an individual who was using the lens of country music to understand this Psalm!) Seriously, there are other suggestions, each of which has some attractiveness.

1. There is a significant affinity between Psalm 88 and the book of Job. Just reading chapters 3 and 5 in Job reveal a frequent parallel focus and expression. The suggestion is thus that Job is the actual source, and this Psalm reveals the heart of one struggling with a breadth of loss. Psalm 88 is a summary form.
2. Another suggestion is that Psalm 88 reflects some of the struggles of someone who has contracted leprosy and thus lives with a chronic illness and who is an outcast from the normal flow of societal life. They could even be suffering from some related disability. Such an individual would be keenly aware of their own mortality.
3. Others suggest that this Psalm is reflective of the time of bondage and servitude in Egypt as described in the early chapters of Exodus.
4. The final suggestion that I will mention at this time is that this Psalm is written by someone suffering from the consequences and fallout of their own sin. They are in the backwash of disobedience and living out the reality of the statement in Romans that “the wages of sin is death.” One primary difficulty with that understanding is that, contrary to the open admission of sin that David makes in Psalm 32 and 51, there is no such statement here

With all of those potential backgrounds, what is the relevance of this Psalm? It does allow us to look over the shoulder, and even into the heart of someone who is experiencing significant struggles in their life, who knows the sting of abandonment and isolation, who believes they are facing death, and who feels overwhelmed. **There is solace** in knowing that other believers struggle. There is solace in knowing that there are times when we don't have all the answers (or even some of some of the answers). But I suggest there is much more that we can consider from this Psalm. I believe that it lays out some essential foundations for any believer when we face troubled times.

Essential Foundations in Troubled Times

We encounter one of these foundations in the very first phrase of Psalm 88.

One essential foundation for the believer in troubled times is to understand our salvation and continue to trust God as our Savior. When an individual comes to know God as their personal Savior, then we can know, on the testimony of Scripture, that we have eternal life (John 3:36 states – ***He who believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.*** I John 5:11-12 - *And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*). Additionally, Romans 8:38-39 states that nothing can separate us from God's love – ***For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

The reality of life is that sometimes the believer may feel, and even think, that although we have salvation – through Christ – because the difficulty that we face persists, or the intensity of what is occurring does not abate, that God has grown distant or is not responsive (at least as we would desire). At such times we may feel unsure of God's love, and perhaps even subject to his wrath. The various suggested backgrounds for this Psalm provide some examples of situations in which such feelings may occur.

It is important at such times to know that God is our Savior, and that we can trust him, even in the absence of tangible evidence of any current benefit from that. **Ideally**, it is best if **we** can make this statement from our own initiative or understanding, as the Psalmist does here. That can be such a critical anchor to our soul! Or it is beneficial if we, at such times, **are open to this reminder** from others. It is **more** challenging when an individual, for whatever reason, does not evidence receptivity to such a reminder.

In all the dialogue between Job and his friends, **he** is the one who makes the statement found in 19:25. *I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.* Those words were incorporated in the first song of today's service. *I know that my Redeemer lives, and now I stand on what He did. My Savior, my Savior lives. Ev'ry day a brand new chance to say, "Jesus, You are the only way!" My Savior lives.*

Not only is that a great message on which to begin a worship service, it is a great statement to personally affirm at the beginning of each day! Just like Psalm 88 does at the very start. "It is true today that Lord, You are the One who saves me!" We don't know what the day will bring, but we can affirm that truth – because of what God Himself has said.

I want to make a very practical suggestion. If you want to personally spend some time this coming week reflecting on Psalm 88, please commit one half of that time to focus on the first seven words. The more I focus on those words the more I find a sense of peace and assurance settle into my heart. That does not lessen the strong statements of personal struggle that follow. But that first phrase lays a foundation from which we can seek to understand and embrace all that the rest of the Psalm conveys.

O Lord, the God who saves me... (these surely are seven critical words)

- Persistence in prayer

From that foundation, I invite us to release the cry of our hearts!

- *Day and night I cry out before you.* Verse. 1a
- *My prayer comes before you; turn your ear to my cry.* Verse 2
- *I call to you, O Lord, every day; I spread out my hands to you.* Verse 9b
- *But I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you.* Verse 13

This persistence in prayer that is woven throughout this Psalm is a second essential foundation from which to walk through troubled times. It is based, I believe, on all that is wrapped up in the statement that God is the One who saves me. Because of that truth, the writer of this Psalm continues to cry out to God in prayer, even when there is no apparent answer that has come by the conclusion of the Psalm.

I find it of interest that the author of the Psalm, amid a very difficult time in life (regardless of actual details about that) continues to talk with God. The very words which have been chosen in these expressions of prayer highlight the reality of that difficulty. "Cry out" in verse 1 comes from a root that refers to calling out to someone when you are under great distress! "My cry" in verse 2 conveys the sense of a ringing, or even piercing cry! "I cry to you" in verse 13 is used to describe an intense cry, often used in the context of a lament. All of those terms suggest anguish in the voice, recognition of the troublesome times being faced, yet we must note that the conversation with God continues.

Luke 18:1 we read – *Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.* Obviously that is far easier said than done! The parable that follows challenges us to persistence in prayer, even in the face of opposition or a delayed response. The instruction of this passage closes with this question from Christ. *However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*

Will there be that level of trust in our Savior that will be a foundation from which to continue to speak with Him, to seek Him out, to pray, amid the difficulties that life presents?

The most recent issue of *Pray* magazine began with an editorial entitled “Just Keep Talking.” That editorial included these words. *God is a safe place to confide our struggles. He’s our Refuge, Counselor, Deliverer, and Friend.* Then the editor proceeds to relate an incident from the life of Dick Eastman. *Dick and his family went through the unimaginable – the unexpected loss of a five-year-old grandson. Although Dick had kept his prayer appointment with the Lord for 35 years, this particular tragedy, more than anything else in all those years, tempted him to break that commitment. Silence was tempting. But instead of giving into it, he kept talking to God.*

Later in the magazine Dick Eastman writes an article that presents six “hope signs” of encouragement that are intended to help us pray our way through such valleys in life. The second of those is the statement that God can be trusted to do what is best. In expanding on that thought, Eastman states that, *As intercessors, we do not have to comprehend fully the mind of God to trust Him.* He continues by observing that someone once asked Mrs. Albert Einstein if she understood the theory of relativity. She responded, “Not at all, but I understand Albert, and he can be trusted.” Eastman concludes with this sentence: *After Jack’s death, I found that praying through the psalms in which David demonstrated desperation yet displayed trust was especially helpful.*

If I were to tag any title to today’s message it would be those words: “Demonstrating Desperation YET Displaying Trust.” (Those are not incompatible!)

- The complete testimony of Scripture

Quickly, because I know our time is escaping, I want to suggest one other foundation upon which we need to stand as we face troubled times. That is the fact that we need to look to the complete testimony of Scripture. The cry from the depths of one’s being that is splattered across the verses of Psalm 88 is not the final word!

In stating that it is not my intent to **discount** in any way the reality of what is addressed in Psalm 88. The truth is that sometimes a believer’s day, or even year, closes with the sense of abandonment and absence of clarity or understanding. At such times we need to remember that this is not the final chapter in the Bible! That honor goes to Revelation 22. From time to time it would be of profit to go to that chapter and read! (As time allows, I want to do that – verses 1-5 and 12-17. We need to let those words of invitation ring in our ears!)

Getting Personal

As we move toward a conclusion this morning I want to suggest some additional personal applications that can be drawn from Psalm 88. While they are not the only applications that come from this portion of Scripture, I do consider them to be worthy of highlight.

- Acceptance or avoidance

As you and I read through this Psalm we have the choice of acceptance or avoidance. After an initial reading we can either determine that we really don’t want to delve into the depths from which the Psalm cries out, or we can proceed to ponder its message, face some of the unanswered questions it poses or implies, and accept a journey of investigation.

Martin Marty says this is a “wintry psalm:” that will not thaw. Now retired as professor of church history at the University of Chicago, Dr. Marty stumbled on this psalm when he wife Elsa was dying. He agreed to read a psalm to her at midnight (each evening) when she was taking some medication. One night, he skipped Psalm 88. She said, “Why did you skip it?” He said, “I’m not sure you could take it. To be honest, I’m not sure I could take it.” Elsa said, “Please read it for me.” So he got to the lines that said, *I cry out in the night before you... For my soul is full of troubles... You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep...* At that point Elsa said, “I need that kind of psalm the most.”

It embraced and stated for her the anguish she experienced. The Psalm didn’t need explanation. As one writer said, you don’t need to glue a plastic smile on the end. You only need to let it speak. To me, for me, about me.

I don’t recall that I had ever really become familiar with this Psalm until this week. I am thankful for the fact that I did not have the luxury of avoiding it. It has helped me embrace the grace of God’s care and love.

In September of 1994 my Father was diagnosed with extensive colon cancer. He had entered the hospital for investigation of an intestinal blockage. It was during that exploratory surgery that the cancer and its extent were revealed. He never ate another meal, he never left the hospital, dying a little more than six weeks later. I remember sitting in his room during a Monday afternoon, which happened to be within about 12 hours before his death. He was unable to speak. His eyes were open, at least part of the time, but I can only guess at what – if anything – he was trying to communicate through those eyes. At such a time I would likely have found little to say, anyhow. I don’t recall that I had any of the specific cries of the heart that I read in Psalm 88. I was confident of his relationship with Christ, and that his death would release him from the rapid downward spiral in health he had experienced. But there is something about the probing of Psalm 88 that has reminded me that it is okay to sit with, to be with others during times of life where we don’t have the answers. And not feel pressed to come up with the answers. But to know that God can be in the midst of those moments more than we can even imagine. Because, as a Savior, He has promised to never leave us or forsake us.

- Vulnerability and openness

Beyond not avoiding this Psalm I want to suggest that this Psalm invites us to a vulnerability and openness that can really serve to build bridges with others.

William Carter, in a sermon on this Psalm states that, *Sometimes we climb out of a domestic wreckage to put on some nice clothes and go to church. A lot of people do everything they can to **look** like their lives are tidy and well-managed. The really pitiful person is not the person with a lot of troubles; no, the pitiful person is the one who **pretends** that everything is alright when it’s not. I think that’s why so many of the psalms are laments. They teach us to be honest with God.*

- Opportunities for empathy

The third application that I offer is that Psalm 88 provides us with an opportunity to experience and express empathy toward someone who is in the midst of troubled times. That someone could be an individual in our Adult Bible Fellowship, a small group study, a neighbor, a member of our own family, or a stranger that we pass on the street.

This is the instruction of I Corinthians 12:24-26. *But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its*

parts should have **equal concern for each other**. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

In his book No Wonder They Call Him Savior, Max Lucado writes about a woman named Judith Bucknell. On June 9, 1980, she was the 106th homicide victim of that year in the city of Miami, Florida. She was 38 at the time of her death. A Miami Herald reporter gained access to her diary. Lucado describes the contents of that diary as a painful epitaph to a lonely life.

Here is one of her entries. *Who is going to love Judy Bucknell? I feel so old. Unloved, Unwanted. Abandoned. Used up. I want to cry and sleep forever.*

In his reflections on such words Lucado writes, *Can you hear it? The abandoned child. The divorcee. The quiet home. The empty mailbox. The long days. The longer nights. A one-night stand. A forgotten birthday. A silent phone. **Cries of loneliness**. Listen again. Tune out the traffic and turn down the TV. The cry is there. Our cities are full of Judy Bucknells. You can hear their cries. You can hear them in the convalescent home among the sighs and the shuffling feet. You can hear them in the prisons among the moans of shame and the calls for mercy. You can hear them if you walk the manicured streets of suburban America, among the aborted ambitions and aging homecoming queens. Listen for it in the halls of our high schools where peer pressure weeds out the “have-nots” from the “haves.” This moan **in** a minor key knows all spectrums of society. From the top to the bottom. From the failures to the famous. From the poor to the rich. From the married to the single. Judy Bucknell was not alone.*

Are we willing to empathetically enter into the world of difficulty, trouble, and confusion that someone around us may be experiencing? Psalm 88, in part, invites us to do that. But being empathetic can be messy. It may not lend itself to concise and simple answers. Even when clearly the best answer is a brief invitation to trust Christ as Savior, the depth of spiritual darkness and years of bondage to wrong thinking often cry against any immediate response of acceptance. Empathy can be a powerful first step in really connecting with someone to whom Christ would desire that we demonstrate the security available when we know Him as the One who saves. But it can look like a very frightful step to take. Psalm 88 invites us to a heightened empathy to both the spoken and silent heart cries of the people around us.

- Glimpses of Christ

Our final application: Earlier, when presenting some potential backgrounds from which this Psalm was written, I chose to not share one suggestion. The words of David Servant offer this additional perspective.

Although Psalm 88 is not specifically quoted anywhere in the New Testament, which would officially validate it as a messianic Psalm, I (along with others) have always considered it a description of Jesus’ anguish on the cross. Some think that Jesus may have been quoting verse 3 of this Psalm, “For my soul has had enough troubles” when He said concerning His imminent crucifixion, “Now My soul has become troubled,” recorded in John 12:27.

We don’t have the time to develop that thought this morning, but I would invite you to reread Psalm 88, and when you have finished, turn to Isaiah 53, and read that chapter of Scripture. As David Servant observes, *It certainly doesn’t seem unreasonable to think that this Psalm prophetically speaks of the terrors Christ experienced on the cross **for our sakes**.*

It is those last three words that are so critical in the full understanding of the message of Isaiah 53. Christ was despised and rejected of men. He was a man of sorrows. He was familiar with suffering. Those statements do echo Psalm 88. And all that Christ experienced was for our sakes!!!!

As stated directly in Isaiah 53:6 – *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Friends, that is grace; that is amazing grace.

The song we sang immediately prior to this message includes these words:

*The love that forgives, the pow'r that saves;
I stand in awe at the depth of His love,
For He reached down and rescued me
With amazing grace.*

I am going to pray and then we will move to the conclusion of the service.

Our desire is that you focus in the remainder of our time this morning on the amazing grace of God found in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Savior!

My desire is that we can all leave knowing that “He is **our** Savior!”