

Putting Our Lamenting Into Perspective

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- [0 : 0 0] So last weekend, Bob and Kathy were incredible encouragements to many of us. I was positively edified, so when I sat down last evening to get back into my study of lament, I thought, I don't really want to think about lament right now.
- But then I spent another week at the funeral home, and I think I'm ready. So, if you will, go with me to Psalm 88. Psalm 88. Now, I'll warn you, this is a dark prayer of lament.
- It's so dark, in fact, the psalm ends with the word darkness. In the original Hebrew writing of it, as well as a few of the English translations, darkness is the last word of this prayer.
- It breaks the typical pattern that I've shown you throughout this study. The psalmist, a man named Heman, never leaves the complaining phase.
- He never offers praise to God. He never turns that all-important corner where he suddenly remembers God's great mercy. Heman seems to know nothing but sorrow in this psalm.
- [1 : 1 4] We don't know the precise circumstances he found himself in. We don't know the full context. Verse 15 indicates that he's suffered for a long time.
- He claims he's been afflicted and close to death from his youth up. That's a long time. Now, maybe that's exaggeration. Maybe there's a bit of hyperbole there.
- I don't know. Regardless, he feels as though he has suffered for a long time. A couple of verses suggest that he's been ostracized by family and friends.
- In verse 8, he says, You have caused my companions to shun me. You have made me a horror to them. In verse 18, he repeats the same complaint, saying, You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me.
- Evidently, Heman's looked to the Lord many times before, but he's never found any relief. In verse 9, he says, Every day I call upon you, O Lord.
- [2 : 1 5] I spread out my hands to you. In verse 13, he says, I, O Lord, cry to you. In the morning, my prayer comes before you. He has prayed, and he has prayed, but he hasn't found any relief.
- Now, looking back through church history, this psalm has commonly been used as a reading on Good Friday, as the church remembers, of course, the death of our Savior.
- And it's been closely linked with Psalm 22, which is an obvious choice for a Good Friday service, since it's quite prophetic. Psalm 22 describes the Lord's crucifixion in surprising detail.
- Now, the reasons for using Psalm 88 might not seem so obvious, but we'll come to that. Let me read it in full. 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.
- [3 : 2 2] 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. You have caused my companions to shun me.

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? Did the departed rise up to praise you? 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?

[4 : 19] 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. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me. My companions have become darkness.

Do we have any Simon and Garfunkel fans here? If so, you probably recognize the theme. Hello, darkness, my old friend.

I've come to talk to you again. This is a sad and tragic prayer. Like other psalms of lament we've considered, Heman finds himself in the utter depths of despair.

Even worse, though, he never seems to find his way out. But we don't see a renewed hope in God. He doesn't sing God's praises at the end. Instead, he concludes the psalm with a hint of resignation.

[5 : 18] My companions have become darkness. Hello, darkness, my old and only friend. By the way, this is one of two psalms that I know of that end like this.

The other is Psalm 39. David, the author of Psalm 39, ends by saying, Look away from me, Lord, that I may smile again. Before I depart and am no more.

David appears to be resigned to his fate. And he believes that fate is death. That's what's around the corner for him. But at least David shows some degree of tension in that psalm.

In that psalm, he recognizes God is vastly greater than man. He even confesses, My hope is in you. Deliver me from all my transgressions. So as he cries out to God, he admits that maybe he's receiving some sort of just discipline.

Yet he never turns that corner to praise God, as most of these laments do. He never steps out of the fog of his despair. Even so, I would argue that Psalm 88 is even darker than Psalm 39.

[6 : 29] And that's the reason I've chosen this text. If we're going to think about lament, let's go all the way to the bottom. Let's consider a man who is so terribly troubled that he never finds hope or comfort in the midst of his prayer.

As far as we know, let's think about what we can learn from this psalm and from lament in general. Evidently, Heman is a man of faith. And I say that, though we can certainly argue his faith has been diminished through his trials.

But notice how he begins this prayer. O Lord, O Yahweh, God of my salvation. This is a man who knows to whom he's speaking.

He knows God by name. He acknowledges that Yahweh is the source of his salvation. All of the days that he has cried out to God, he has done so with an understanding that God can deliver him.

Skipping down to verses 3 through 5, Heman has been so troubled for so long that he feels that his very life is slipping away from him. He has one foot in Sheol, that is the grave or the realm of the dead.

[7 : 42] He's still alive, but as far as he's concerned, he's as good as dead. He doesn't have any strength left. Perhaps he's saying that he lacks the will to live. And what should happen once he's actually dead?

He says he'll be forgotten. Even by God. Regarding verse 5, Spurgeon says, Heman felt as though, as if he were as utterly forgotten as those whose carcasses are left to rot on the battlefield.

As when a soldier, mortally wounded, bleeds unheeded amidst the heaps of slain, and remains to his last expiring groan, unpitied and unsuckered, so did Heman.

Sigh out his soul in loneliest sorrow, feeling as if even God himself had quite forgotten him. How long the spirits of good and brave men will sometimes sink.

Under the influence of certain disorders, everything will wear a somber aspect, and the heart will dive into the profoundest deeps of misery. In verse 6, Heman's lament turns into a bit of an accusation.

[8 : 55] You, he says, have put me in the depths of the pit. He seems to imply that maybe God is treating him like a wicked man or a reprobate.

He charges God with oppressing him and taking away his closest friends. He believes God has not only made him suffer, but also made him to suffer alone. Again, I'll cite Spurgeon who says, The mind can descend far lower than the body, for it there are bottomless pits.

The flesh can bear only a certain number of wounds and no more, but the soul, the soul can bleed in 10,000 ways and die over and over again each hour. And I believe that's where we find Heman.

I suspect his mind is in a much worse place than his body. As we continue in this psalm, especially as we come to the questions in verses 10 through 12, commentators don't altogether agree regarding Heman's intentions.

Is he asking these questions as a way to manipulate the Lord? Lord, if you don't let me live, I can't really praise you now, can I? Or perhaps he's sincerely asking, Lord, I want to praise you, but I feel like I'm under your wrath, and pretty soon I'll be dead.

[10 : 16] My opportunities for praising you will be gone. Lord, will you relieve me before it comes to that? Either way, Heman, he doesn't want to die, not like this.

He doesn't want to leave this world, feeling as though he's under some sort of divine curse. The question in verse 14 may indicate that he longs to experience the favorable presence of God once again.

He asks, Oh Lord, why do you cast my soul away? The NIV says, Why do you reject me? Evidently, he doesn't know the answer.

He doesn't understand why this is happening. Like Job, he's tormented in part by his ignorance. He feels that maybe God is punishing him, but he doesn't really know why. There's a mystery to the whole thing.

Now some commentators have said this question of why is really a question of faith. They suggest that it's good to ask the Lord why, but I don't know if we can always say that with certainty.

[11 : 24] And that's one of the challenges of studying lament in the Bible. Job, for example, we're told he was blameless. He was upright. He feared the Lord and he turned away from evil.

And yet the Lord admonished him for many of the questions that he voiced and the statements that he made throughout his lamenting and those conversations with his miserable comfort of friends.

The fact is these prayers of lament are coming from faithful men who believe in the goodness of God, but their prayers are very muddled by their pain and their fears.

It's not always obvious whether their questions are appropriate, which is why the Bible commentators don't agree. As I said before, these men are expressing a real struggle within themselves.

There's tension there. It's a struggle between knowing God's goodness and enduring their trials, which seems counterintuitive to God's goodness and his faithfulness to his people.

[12 : 35] They're experiencing tension between God's faithfulness to his people and that sense of him being so far removed from their situation. They don't know what to make of it and their confusion comes out in these prayers.

So once again, these laments aren't necessarily teaching us how best to pray. In them we see a mixture really of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. And sometimes that line between them is very blurry.

But that's okay because the primary takeaway from these is not how best to pray. We're not being taught how to pray. In a moment, I'll come to what is the biggest takeaway of all.

And that's where we want to end today. But for now, understand that you aren't alone if you've ever felt the way these men have felt. And this is something we see in these prayers.

These are real prayers from real people with real concerns, real fears, real struggles. Here we have a man who has trusted in God as his Savior.

[13 : 41] We see that in verse 1. And yet he's not immune from this darkness. Right? He's not impervious to despair. And that's an important lesson in these laments.

Even believers in this world may find themselves in the depths of darkness. As Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote in his excellent book, *Spiritual Depression*, he says, the Scriptures do grant clearly by their teaching that it is possible for a Christian to be depressed.

Now listen to this next part. Not that they justify this, but they do recognize the fact. And I think that's an important distinction.

A couple of months ago, it was one of those weeks where I woke up on a Monday and I really didn't want to start the week. I wanted that weekend to last just a little bit longer. And so as I was sitting down to sip on some coffee, I pulled Spurgeon's devotional out and I read for the day.

Here's what he said. Do you believe that your sins are forgiven and that Christ has made a full atonement for them? Then what a joyful Christian you ought to be.

[14 : 53] How you should live above the common trials and troubles of the world. Since sin is forgiven, can it matter what happens to you now? What a great question.

Since your sin is forgiven, can it matter what happens to you now? That's what Martin Lloyd-Jones meant when he says the Bible doesn't justify our despair. It shows us that we can have despair, but it doesn't justify our despair.

Ultimately, believers in Christ don't have a reason to feel despair. Yet, the Bible does show us that faithful men and women have felt that way.

Furthermore, Psalm 88 in particular shows us that believers can sometimes feel that way for extended periods of time. Believers have been known to find themselves trapped in Doubting Castle for long stretches of time fumbling for that key in their pocket that they just can't find.

They know the promises of God. They know the goodness of God. They believe He is the source of their salvation. But the external darkness of their circumstances has a way of creeping in and becoming a kind of inner darkness.

[16 : 07] In their minds and in their hearts. It's like they're fumbling through a dark room and they just can't get their eyes to adjust. That was the reality for Heman.

He's lost his friends. He's facing death. He's praying and he's praying without finding any kind of relief. He might escape the darkness if only he could sense God's loving presence.

But even that appears to be missing. He feels abandoned. He feels rejected. He thinks God is angry with him but he doesn't really know why.

He trusts God to be his salvation but in the end he feels himself completely overwhelmed by this darkness. Now I know Psalm 88 may seem terribly discouraging but I consider it a blessing.

Why? Well if for no other reason God gave us this Psalm to show us a measure of authenticity. For years now I've followed this little blog written by a practicing Buddhist and I'm talking about the American liberal version of a Buddhist.

[17 : 20] He likes to give these small actionable steps advice to help people achieve complete peace in their lives. And to be clear I'm not interested in his advice but I've always been intrigued by this concept that how are you going to as he says create a heaven on earth in your mind.

You can completely remove every bit of negativity and just live in this weird little bubble that is a heaven on earth. Well I've noticed that throughout the years he has never admitted to having a bad day.

But I guess that's to be assumed. I mean he's found heaven on earth, right? But he never warns his readers that they'll have a bad day. Instead he always paints this unrealistically rosy picture of life.

He says if you do this all of your troubles will just disappear. The Bible on the other hand doesn't do that. The Bible is remarkably honest about our struggles in this world.

It doesn't attempt to whitewash the Christian life. It doesn't say if only you'll follow Christ everything will be smooth sailing. In fact it says the exact opposite of that.

[18 : 37] Jesus said whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. Jesus says before you can follow me you should know that personal sacrifice is involved.

It won't always be easy. Yes the rewards are great unimaginably great. But I'm not offering instant gratification. If that's what you're looking for you'll have to look elsewhere.

I can't give you instant gratification. The path of Christian discipleship is one of cross bearing. Not only will you still have troubles in this world but you will in fact have some greater troubles.

If you listen to a Buddhist or you listen to a prosperity preacher or many others in this world they will give you false promise after false promise of complete satisfaction right here right now.

That's not honest. I consider it a blessing to read the Bible and to see how the saints before me struggled. To see they went through some of the same things that I've been through.

[19 : 48] To see they've had the same fears the same misunderstandings the same confusions. Last week we heard all about the flaws in the Corinthian church right? In short the saints before us were human beings living in a fallen world.

Of course they had troubles and I think we can appreciate God's honesty with us about those troubles. What's that line from the the princess bride?

I believe it goes life is pain anyone who tells you differently is selling you something. True Christianity isn't selling anything. It doesn't make false promises in fact true Christianity is very honest about the challenges it's honest about the difficulties we will face as disciples of Christ.

The lament psalms in particular are very honest about the darkness we sometimes experience. They're honest about the depths of that darkness and sometimes the longevity of that darkness.

They're honest about the imperfect responses we may have to that darkness. This kind of honesty is a great blessing because God has not given us false expectations.

[21 : 03] We don't enter into the Christian life thinking wow everything is going to be perfect now I'm never going to have a bad day again. It's a great blessing because we can look at scripture when we face our trials and see that others have faced them too.

Job faced terrible trials though he had not done anything specifically to bring those trials upon himself. Yes sometimes we suffer as a part of God's discipline but sometimes we suffer through no specific fault of our own that we can point to.

So the Bible gives us very real expectations. It's not selling us something. But let's go further. Now when we read the lament psalms as we've discussed we typically see a pattern that begins with a desperate cry to God and it ends with the lamenter praising God.

And that prompts us to ask how do we go from the depths of despair to praising God in a single prayer? Even if you were reading one of these psalms for the very first time you would immediately realize that such a transformation must be possible.

We see it right here. There is a way to escape despair. The psalm itself may not provide the answer as to what exactly happened from the first verse to the last verse but at least you know there must be an answer somewhere.

[22 : 28] But what about Psalm 88? Heman finds no reprieve. He doesn't praise God. He doesn't seem to escape his despair. Again his last words are my companions have become darkness.

Darkness is my only friend. Now if this were the first biblical lament that someone ever read he probably wouldn't immediately understand what kind of lessons we can draw from a passage like this.

Then again he would probably notice that this psalm is only 18 verses in a Bible with more than 30,000 verses. Right?

In other words Psalm 88 is not the extent of what God has set. We'd have a pretty miserable religion if Psalm 88 was the entirety of the Bible.

If you choose to study of the lament study the subject of lament any further after today I think this will be really helpful. Over the years I've read a few books and many articles about lament and if you ever read anything about lament where the author never goes outside of the lament psalms to make his points to build his theology you may want to find a different source to learn from.

[23 : 48] The lament psalms don't necessarily teach us how to pray. They don't provide commentary on themselves. They don't give us the much fuller view that we really need to understand them.

So we need to place them in the context of the entire Bible. Having said that let's briefly consider why Heman may be suffering. Why is God not answering his prayers?

Why is God not giving him instant relief? What's happening here? It may be great that the Bible is honest about our trials but it doesn't necessarily that doesn't necessarily explain why we have them.

So let me give you five possibilities. First God's people may suffer because God is moving us toward repentance.

He's moving us toward repentance. During this series I know I've quoted John Newton's hymn a few times let me quote it again. The narrator in the song he prays that he might know more of his salvation.

[24 : 55] He wants to grow in grace and faith and God answers his prayer by seemingly plunging him into greater despair. And when the Lord finally explains why in the hymn he says tis in this way I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ from self and pride to set thee free and break thy schemes of earthly joy that thou mayest find by all in me. What better way to loosen our grip hope on all of the idols to which we cling than to prove they can't actually do anything for us.

They can't bring us satisfaction. We must turn to God. And by the way sometimes sometimes we suffer to lead others to repentance.

Do you remember when Jesus spoke about the 18 people who died when the tower and Siloam fell? He said do you think that they were worse offenders than all of the others who lived in Jerusalem?

No, I tell you. But unless you repent you will all likewise perish. We could say the same thing about Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5.

[26 : 11] They served as a warning to others. Second, we may suffer because God wants to strengthen our reliance on Him.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 1 this is verses 8 and 9 Paul says for we do not want you to be unaware brothers of the affliction we experienced in Asia.

For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed we felt that we had received the sentence of death but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

Third, we may suffer because God is sanctifying us. He's conforming us more and more to the image of His Son. He's making us increasingly holy.

Listen to Hebrews 12. for the Lord disciplines the one He loves and chastises every son whom He receives. Skipping ahead, He disciplines us for our good that we may share His holiness.

[27 : 26] For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Fourth, we may suffer because God prepares us for things to come. Let's say greater things to come.

Second Corinthians 4, verses 17 and 18, for this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.

the more we learn about sin and suffering especially first hand the more we long for heaven.

Fifth, we may suffer as a reminder. A reminder of what? Well here we come to the biggest takeaway of all. Getting back to Psalm 88, arguably the darkest lament in all the Psalms we see Heman clinging to God throughout his entire prayer.

[28 : 45] Even at the end when he claims darkness is his only companion, he is still crying out to God. Right? He holds on to hope that God will be his salvation in this trial.

And in that way he's similar to Job. For all of his lamenting, do you remember that great resurrection statement Job made? In Job 19 he said, For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God, whom I shall see for myself and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

While we don't see anything quite like that in Psalm 88, Heman still clings to God from beginning to end, and I'm willing to give him credit for at least that much.

The question is why? Why would a believer continue to hope in God when he feels God is angry with him? Why would a believer continue to hope in God when he feels that God refuses to answer his prayer or to rescue him?

from the despair he's in. Heman feels as though he's being crushed to death and yet he still cries out to God. He doesn't turn away. His prayer is certainly imperfect, accusatory even, but he still clings to God.

[30 : 19] As we've seen, most of the lamenters, they praise God before their prayers are ended. Their circumstances haven't changed, but they praise God.

How do we explain this? Well, last time I talked about David's change in perspective in Psalm 13. He certainly experienced a change in perspective, but we need to go further.

To say there was a change in his perspective doesn't fully explain why there was a change. Well, let me read to you from the Gospels. And this is actually a synthetic harmony that includes details from all four Gospels.

listen to this. Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.

And he said to his disciples, sit here while I go and pray over there. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, James and John, and he began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed.

[31 : 21] Then he said to them, my soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with me.

Pray that you may not enter into temptation. He went a little farther, being withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and he knelt down on the ground and fell in his face and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.

And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. If it is your will, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done. Then an angel appeared to him from heaven, strengthening him, and being in agony, he prayed more earnestly.

Then his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. It goes on from there, but do you sense the Lord's anguish as he approaches the cross?

Do you sense that darkness that was enveloping him? And that was just the beginning of his agony. As you know, things would get much worse, so skipping ahead to the final hours of Jesus' life, now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour, the sun was darkened, and there was darkness over all the land, which I think is reflective.

[32 : 49] It's a physical manifestation of something spiritual, if you will, that was taking place, something unseen. And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Some of those who stood there when they heard that said, look, this man is calling for Elijah. After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, said, I thirst.

Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there. Immediately, one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed of hyssop, and put it to his mouth, and offered it to him to drink.

The rest said, let him alone, let us see if Elijah will come to save him and take him down. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, it is finished.

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Having said this, and bowing his head, he breathed his last, and yielded up his spirit.

[33 : 58] Now if you think my point is that Christ can sympathize with us, you're only half right. I want us to see that Christ is the only one who has ever been in a position to rightfully lament the way Heman or David or others have lamented.

In Psalm 22 for example, David may have felt forsaken by God, but he wasn't. He wasn't forsaken by God. Jesus on the other hand was.

And that is why he claims those words when he's hanging on the cross. My God, why have you forsaken me? David did not suffer the full wrath of God for his sins.

Christ did. Heman may have felt darkness was his only friend, his only companion left in this world, but that wasn't true. Christ, on the other hand, was forsaken by everyone, including God the Father.

He's the only one who has truly experienced the depth of darkness described in Psalm 88, and because he did, we can have hope even in the worst of our sufferings.

[35 : 28] Now, we may not know the immediate reasons for our trials, but every trial can serve as a reminder that we will never experience anything as terrible as what Christ did when he suffered the wrath of God for our sins.

Never. And because he did, we know that our suffering is only temporary. It can only be temporary. Even if it were to last a lifetime, we can know this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

Jesus willingly plunged himself into deeper darkness than Heman ever felt, than you and I could ever feel, and he rose victorious from it. He defeated the darkness for us.

If we believe this more times than not, we won't feel any need to lament. Can it matter what happens to you now? But even when we do, we can still praise God out of our anguish.

Right? As many of the psalmists did. And if nothing else, at the very least, I pray that we can always, will always, cling to God in hope no matter how dark things get.

[36 : 58] After all, he is the God of our salvation. And that is why we read in Hebrews 4.16, let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

So, if nothing else, the darkness we may experience is a reminder of the darkness Christ experienced and what he accomplished through suffering that darkness.

I'll leave you with a quote. I can't remember who said it. It's been with me ever since I was a kid, but I remember one preacher telling me that this life is as close to heaven as the unbeliever will ever get.

And this life is as close to hell as the believer will ever get. let's pray. Heavenly Father, we have profound thanksgiving for the immeasurable gift of your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We reflect on the depths of his suffering, a suffering that surpassed anything that humanity could ever endure. He bore the weight of sin, the agony of the cross, the separation from you, and all of it out of love for us.

[38 : 26] So we're reminded, Lord, that Christ's suffering was the ultimate sacrifice, one that we could never fully comprehend. Yet, it was through his unparalleled suffering that we find our redemption, our salvation.

We are eternally grateful that he endured what no other person could so that we, his disciples, would never have to bear that burden. So in the shadow of his sacrifice, we find hope, we find forgiveness, we find the promise of eternal life, the temporary nature of our own sufferings in this life.

May we never forget, Lord, the depths of Christ's love and suffering on our behalf, that we may live our lives in gratitude and obedience to him, always.

may we turn to him in our despair and may we always find hope through him no matter what we endure. I offer this prayer in the name of our suffering Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen. We're dismissed.