

Psalm 88

A Song [or] Psalm for the sons of Korah,

To the chief Musician upon Mahalath Leannoth, Maschil of Heman the Ezrahite.

Psalm 88:

Certainly, this is the gloomiest psalm in the entire collection, this psalm fails of the slightest ray of hope.

Perhaps the author had experienced a tragedy like that of Job for which he had no explanation.

In any case, the lack of hope is not because the psalmist has not prayed; rather, he has prayed earnestly and reminds the LORD that he has done so (verses 1-2, 9, 13).

The elements of the psalm consist of petition (verses 1-2), lament verses (3-9, 15-18), and a motivation for God to act (verses 10-14).

In this last section eight rhetorical questions are addressed to God to reinforce the fact that the psalmist can only praise Him and be faithful to Him in this life.

His death will serve no purpose.

Verses 1-18:

This lament is unusual in that it does not end on a happy note.

The psalmist has been ill or injured since the days of his youth (verse 15), and bemoans God's failure to hear his prayer for good health.

He assumes that God is angry with him, but like Job, he knows of no cause for that anger.

But though he does not understand God's ways, the psalmist does turn to God, thus indicating an underlying trust.

- I. Complaints Against God's Action (88:1-9).
- II. Challenges to God's Wisdom (88:10-12).
- III. Charges Against God's Conduct (88:13-18).

Title:

"Sons of Korah" (see note on Psalm 84: Title).

"Mahalath Leannoth":

“Mahalath” is either the name of a tune or an instrument, possibly a reed pipe which was played on sad occasions.

“Leannoth” may mean “to afflict” and describes the despair which permeates this psalm.

“Maschil” (see note on Psalm 32: Title).

“Hedman the Ezrahite”:

Heman was a musician from the family of the Kohathites, who founded the Korahite choir (compare 1 Chron. 6:33; 2 Chron. 5:12; 35:15).

He may be the same person who was one of the wise men during the reign of Solomon (see 1 Kings 4:31).

“Ezrahite” may mean “native born”, or may be the name of a family clan (compare 1 Chronicles verse 2:6).

This is the lament of an individual completely engulfed in gloom and despair.

It ends without an answer or even a glimmer of hope.

Verses 1-9:

The first words of the psalmist are the only words of comfort and support in this psalm.

Thus, greatly may many good men be afflicted, and such dismal thoughts may they have about their afflictions.

And such dark conclusion may they make about their end, through the power of melancholy and the weakness of faith.

He complained most of God's displeasure.

Even the children of God's love may sometimes think themselves children of wrath and no outward trouble can be so hard upon them as that.

Probably the psalmist described his own case, yet he leads to Christ.

Thus, are we called to look unto Jesus, wounded and bruised for our iniquities.

But the wrath of God poured the greatest bitterness into his cup.

This weighed him down into darkness and the deep.

Psalm 88:1 "O LORD God of my salvation, I have cried day [and] night before thee:"

The author both of temporal and spiritual salvation (see Psalm 18:46).

From the experience, the psalmist had of the Lord's working salvation for him in times past, he is encouraged to hope that he would appear for him, and help him out of his present distress.

His faith was not so low, but that amidst all his darkness and dejection he could look upon the Lord as his God, and the God of salvation to him.

So our Lord Jesus Christ, when deserted by his Father, still called him his God, and believed that he would help him (Psalm 22:1).

"I have cried day and night before thee":

Or "in the day I have cried.

And in the night before thee"; that is, as the Targum paraphrases it, "in the night my prayer was before thee."

Prayer being expressed by crying shows the person to be in distress, denotes the earnestness of it, and shows it to be vocal.

And it being both in the day and in the night, that it was without ceasing.

The same is said by Christ (Psalm 22:2).

And is true of him, who in the days of his flesh was frequent in prayer, and especially in the night season (Luke 6:12).

And particularly his praying in the garden the night he was betrayed may be here referred to (Matt. 26:38).

This Psalm speaks of tribulations.

We must remember that tribulation comes to make us strong in the Lord.

Jesus Christ (their Messiah), is the God of salvation.

Note again here, that the Psalmist calls God, my God.

Whatever the prayer, it was of a very urgent nature, since he prayed night and day.

This Psalm is very sad.

Psalm 88:2 "Let my prayer come before thee: incline thine ear unto my cry;"

Not before men, as hypocrites desire, but before the LORD.

Let it not be shut out, but be admitted.

And let it come with acceptance, as it does when it ascends before God.

Out of the hands of the angel before the throne, perfumed with the much incense of his mediation (Revelation 8:3).

"Incline thine ear unto my cry":

Hearken to it, receive it, and give an answer to it.

Christ's prayers were attended with strong crying, and they were always received and heard (Hebrews 5:7).

The Psalmist is begging the LORD not to look the other way, but to consider his prayer.

Turn your ear toward me and hear my pleas.

Psalm 88:3 "For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave."

I am full of trouble.

The word rendered as "full" means properly to filled as with food.

That is, when as much had been taken as could be.

So he says here, that this trouble was as great as he could bear.

He could sustain no more.

He had reached the utmost point of endurance; he had no power to bear anymore.

Innumerable evils compassed him about (Psalm 40:12), and the sins of his people, those evil things, were imputed to him.

The iniquity of them all was laid upon him, as was also the evil of punishment for them; and then he found trouble and sorrow enough.

"And my life draweth nigh unto the grave":

A phrase expressive of a person's being just ready to die (Job 33:22).

As the psalmist now thought he was (Psalm 88:5).

It is in the plural number "my lives"; and so may not only denote the danger he was in of his natural life, but of his spiritual and eternal life.

Which he might fear, being in darkness and desertion, would be lost, though they could not.

Yea, that he was near to "hell" itself, for so the word may be rendered.

For when the presence of God is withdrawn, and wrath let into the conscience, a person in his own apprehension seems to be in hell as it were, or near it (see Jonah 2:2).

This was true of Christ, when he was sorrowful unto death, and was brought to the dust of it.

And under divine dereliction, and a sense of the wrath of God, as the surety of his people.

The psalmist is saying that his soul is sick.

Perhaps, even death is very near.

Whether this be physical death, or death of his soul, it does not say.

Psalm 88:4 "I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man [that hath] no strength:"

“Go down into the pit”:

“Pit” is one of several references to the grave in this psalm (compare the dead (verses 5, 10); Sheol, or the grave (verses 3, 5, 11); Abaddon (verse 11).

This verse makes it clear that the sickness of his soul is because he has sinned and feels that God will not hear.

The pit he speaks of is hell.

His strength comes from the LORD, and he is out of contact with the LORD, so his strength is gone.

Psalm 88:5 "Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more: and they are cut off from thy hand."

“Free among the dead”:

Expresses the idea that death cuts off all ties to friends and family as well as to God.

He is saying here, that once you die in your sin, there is no more help for you.

He also is saying that he is like that man, because he cannot seem to hear from God.

He feels all is lost.

There is no hope for him.

He should remember what he said in the first verse.

He called God, God of my salvation.

We must have faith to be able to reach God.

His problem is, that he has given up.

Psalm 88:6 "Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps."

The Targum interprets it of "captivity which was like unto the lowest pit"; and so say both Jarchi and Kimchi.

Some understand it of a prison or dungeon, into which the psalmist was put.

It may be interpreted of the pit of the grave, into which Christ was laid.

Though he continued in it not so long as to see corruption; from that prison and judgment he was quickly taken (Psalm 16:10).

"In darkness":

Both corporeal and spiritual (Matthew 27:45).

And it is in the Hebrew text "in darknesses", denoting both.

"In the deeps":

In the deep waters of affliction, sorrows, and sufferings (see Psalm 69:1).

The allusion is to a dark and deep pit, underground, such as in the eastern countries they used to put their captives and prisoners into in the night, and take them out in the morning.

And which custom continues still among the Turks.

Leo Africanus says he has seen three thousand Christian captives together, clothed in a woolen sack, and chained to one another.

And in the night put into pits or ditches underground (see Zech. 9:11).

He believes that God's wrath has already begun for him.

He is blaming God for laying him in the pit.

His darkness is caused, because he chose to walk in the dark.

Psalm 88:7 "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted [me] with all thy waves. Selah."

"All thy waves":

Like the waves rolling onto the seashore, so God has directed trouble after trouble on the psalmist (compare verse 17).

To feel God's wrath would be unbearable for anyone.

He feels as if the wrath of God is coming over him, one after the other, as the waves of the sea, when it is angry.

Psalm 88:8 "Thou hast put away mine acquaintance far from me; thou hast made me an abomination unto them: [I am] shut up, and I cannot come forth."

“Put away mine acquaintance”:

The psalmist claims that the LORD has turned his friends against him.

Some see this as a quarantine experience, as from leprosy (compare verse 18; also Job 19:13-20).

In this verse, he has lost all of his friends.

Notice in everything that happens to him, he thinks God is punishing him.

He either had fair weather friends, or he has done something so dreadful that no one wants to be associated with him.

Whether he is shut up like in prison, or whether this is symbolic of the way he currently feels, we are not told.

Psalm 88:9 "Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction: LORD, I have called daily upon thee, I have stretched out my hands unto thee."

“Eye mourneth by reason of affliction”:

This could be a description of the psalmist’s tears, used as a figure for his entire collapse under this distress.

It appears that he cried until no more tears would come.

He is saying that he has continued to pray every day.

He has reached out to God, but he feels God has not responded to him.

Verses 10-18:

Departed souls may declare God's faithfulness, justice, and lovingkindness; but deceased bodies can neither receive God's favors in comfort, nor return them in praise.

The psalmist resolved to continue in prayer, and the more so, because the deliverance did not come speedily.

Though our prayers are not soon answered, yet we must not give up praying.

The greater our troubles, the more earnest and serious we should be in prayer.

Nothing grieves a child of God so much as losing sight of him.

Nor is there anything he so much dreads as God's casting off his soul.

If the sun be clouded, that darkens the earth; but if the sun should leave the earth, what a dungeon would it be!

Even those designed for God's favors, may for a time suffer his terrors.

See how deep those terrors wounded the psalmist.

If friends are put far from us by providences, or of death, we have a good reason to look upon it as affliction.

Such was the calamitous state of a good man.

But the pleas here used were peculiarly suited to Christ.

And we are not to think that the holy Jesus suffered for us only at Gethsemane and on Calvary.

His whole life was labor and sorrow.

He was afflicted as never man was, from his youth up.

He was prepared for that death of which he tasted through life.

No man could share in the sufferings by which other men were to be redeemed.

All forsook him, and fled.

Oftentimes, blessed Jesus, do we forsake thee.

But do not forsake us, O take not thy Holy Spirit from us.

Psalm 88:10 "Wilt thou show wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise [and] praise thee? Selah."

“Wonders to the dead?”:

The psalmist reminds God, through a series of rhetorical questions, that the dead cannot testify to God’s goodness.

Of course, the righteous dead will rise and praise Him, but I do not believe he is speaking of the righteous here.

He is speaking of those who died in their sin.

He is saying, forgive me, before I die and it is too late.

It is time to pause and think on these things.

Psalm 88:11 "Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? [or] thy faithfulness in destruction?"

Where he saw himself now going, and where should he be detained, and not raised out of it.

The lovingkindness of God to him, as his Son, and as man and Mediator, and to his people in the gift and mission of him to be their Savior and Redeemer.

How would that be declared and made known?

Now it is, that of Christ being raised, and his ministers having a commission from him to preach the Gospel.

In which the lovingkindness of God is abundantly manifested.

"Or thy faithfulness in destruction?":

The grave, which is so called from dead bodies being cast into it, and wasted, consumed, and destroyed in it.

The meaning may be, that should he be laid in the grave, and there putrefy and rot, and not be raised again.

Where would be the faithfulness of God to his purposes, to his covenant and promises, to him his Son, and to his people?

He is going on and on about the futility of getting help after he dies.

The lovingkindness is for those here on the earth who seek God early.

The lovingkindness of God showed mercy on God's people.

After you are in the grave, it is too late to repent.

Psalm 88:12 "Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?"

A description of the grave again (see Job 10:21).

The sense may be, should he continue in the dark and silent grave, how would the wonders of the grace of God, of electing, redeeming, justifying, pardoning, and adopting grace, be made known.

The wonders of Christ's person and offices, and the wondrous things, and doctrines of the Gospel, relating thereunto?

As the glory of these would be eclipsed, there would be none to publish them.

"And thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?":

The grave, where the dead lie.

Who, having lost all sense of things, forget what were done in this world, and they themselves are quickly forgotten by the living.

And had Christ continued in this state, and had not risen again to our justification, how would his justifying righteousness have been revealed.

As it is from faith to faith in the Gospel, which is therefore called the word and ministration of righteousness?

This is speaking of Hades.

The only known time that Jesus went into hell and preached and brought out captivity captive, was immediately after he was crucified.

The verse here, is not speaking of that time.

He is just saying over and over, that after a person has died and gone to hell, there is no hope.

Psalm 88:13 "But unto thee have I cried, O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee."

Formerly, and had been heard, answered, and relieved, and which was an encouragement to cry again to him in his distress.

Christ was always heard (John 11:42), or, now, in his present case, yet was not heard, at least not immediately answered.

Which was the case of the Messiah, when forsaken by his God and Father (Psalm 22:1), yet still determines to continue praying, as follows.

"And in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee":

Not before the LORD is awake, and can hear.

For he neither slumbers nor sleeps, and he always hears.

But the meaning is, that he would pray before he entered upon another business.

This should be the first thing in the morning he would do, and this he would do before others did, or he himself used to do.

Before the usual time of morning prayer; signifying, he would pray to him very early, which is expressive of his vehemence, fervency, and importunity and earnestness.

And what a sense he had of his case, and of his need of divine help.

So, Christ rose early in the morning, a great while before day, to pray (Mark 1:35; see note on Psalm 5:4).

It appears that he will not stop praying, until he gets a positive answer from the LORD.

That is the very best thing to do.

God does hear.

If God feels he is sincere in his repentance and will live uprightly, He will answer his prayer.

Psalm 88:14 "LORD, why castest thou off my soul? [why] hidest thou thy face from me?"

“Hidest thou thy face”:

That is, not answer prayer.

Some might say is it alright to question God?

I think it is alright, if it’s done for the right reason, and as long as you are earnestly seeking answers from God.

This verse appears that this person, at one time, knew God.

He is asking, LORD have you turned me over to a reprobate mind?

Psalm 88:15 "I [am] afflicted and ready to die from [my] youth up: [while] I suffer thy terrors I am distracted."

“Die from my youth”:

The psalmist has had some serious illness or injury from the time of his youth.

There is no terror of death to those who know they are in right standing with God.

From the time we are born, we are dying.

We live on the world a very short time, even if we live the allotted time.

Psalm 88:16 "Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off."

Or "wraths":

Burning wrath.

The whole of divine wrath, in all its fierceness, due to the sins of his people.

These, like the mighty waves of the sea, passed over him, thus threatening to overwhelm him (Psalm 89:38).

"Thy terrors have cut me off":

From the presence of God, and out of his sight.

As sometimes the Lord's people are ready to imagine, when forsaken by him (Psalm 31:22).

Or from the land of the living, as the Messiah was, and in a judicial way, though not for any sin of his own (Isa. 53:8).

Whatever the punishment is, it is from a loving Father.

He may be feeling completely destroyed, but he is not dead yet.

It will be too late after he dies, but now he is still alive.

I believe the terror that he is feeling here, is the fact that he is cut off from God.

I cannot imagine anything any worse, than to feel you were cut off from God.

Psalm 88:17 "They came round about me daily like water; they compassed me about together."

That is, the terrors of the LORD.

The sorrows of death and hell (Psalm 18:4).

This was the Messiah's case, when it was with him as is expressed (Psalm 69:1).

"They compassed me about together":

As waters coming from many places, from all quarters.

Meet together, and together surround a person or place in such circumstances was Christ.

When the bulls of Bashan beset him around, and the assembly of the wicked enclosed him, and innumerable evils encompassed him about (Psalm 22:12).

These are troubles that have come around him.

It also means that the punishment that God has brought upon him, to make him repent are all around him.

Psalm 88:18 "Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, [and] mine acquaintance into darkness."

"Lover ... friend ... acquaintance":

(See note on verse 8).

The “darkness” of grief is reminiscent of death.

This psalm, which does not have the statement of faith that all other lament psalms contain, stands as a mark of realism on the landscape of biblical faith.

Even believers experience seasons that seem hopeless.

It is important to remain steadfast during these times, to fear the Lord and keep His commands, for there is hope.

He has no one, not even his lover, or his friend who stayed with him.

He is totally alone.

Psalm 88 Questions

1. What does Psalm chapter 88 speak of?
2. Who is the God of salvation?
3. What is the tone of this Psalm?
4. What does the psalmist say is sick, in 88:3?
5. What are the two kinds of death, he could be speaking of?
6. Why is he sick in his soul?
7. What is the pit in verse 4?
8. Can you be saved, after you die without repenting?
9. Who is the psalmist blaming for his problems?
10. Why has darkness come upon him?
11. In verse 7, what does he compare God's wrath, on him, to?
12. What has happened to him in verse 8?
13. Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the _____?
14. In verse 12, what is the dark?
15. What would cause God to answer his prayer?
16. At what time do we begin to die?

17. Who is there no terror of death for?

18. In verse 18, who are the two that have been put away from him?