

July 21/22, 2001

A Cry in the Darkness

Psalm 88

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Wouldn't it be great if, after you trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, we could say regarding this life, "...and they lived happily ever after"? But that is the stuff of fairy tales. I know there are people who preach a message of health and wealth and prosperity, implying that when you come to Christ you will have no more problems, and everything will be prosperous and healthy. But Jesus never promised that. As a matter of fact, Jesus said, "In this life, you will have troubles."

The fact is that, in this life, sometimes we suffer. Sometimes there are things that happen that we cannot understand or explain—they just don't make sense. We don't come to Jesus to satisfy our consumer appetites. We come to Jesus because we are sinners in need of a Savior. Our Christian life is not lived out on a playground; it is lived out on a battleground, and sometimes it feels that way.

It was just a year ago this very weekend that we commissioned Brian and Clover Nicklas to be missionaries in Belgium. I don't know if you remember that commissioning, but Brian is the one who has a hobby with pigeons, and God orchestrated events so that he is going to the pigeon capitol of the world in Belgium. Now, I didn't know that until their commissioning, but apparently people are really into pigeons in Belgium.

I always have had a great admiration for those who are willing to give up everything—their culture, their life, their relationships—and go to another part of the world in a completely different culture to proclaim the Gospel. And you'd think that if there was one group of people that God would put His hand on and make sure nothing bad happens to, it would be missionaries. They have given up everything to fulfill the Great Commission. But sometimes it doesn't work that way.

A few months ago, Brian and Clover found out that their little son Nathan had cancer, and it ended up that he had to have one of his eyes removed, so Nathan will go through the rest of his life with an artificial eye. As if that wasn't enough, shortly after that, Brian had a bout with Bell's Palsy. Half of his face became paralyzed and droopy, and because the eyelid didn't work correctly, he ended up with an infection in his eye. When he shared this with our staff recently, he told us they were rejoicing, because the doctor didn't think they were going to have to stitch his eyelid shut. (I thought that sounded kind of gruesome to me.)

None of that makes any sense. Why would those things happen to Brian and Clover? Where is God in all of that? I mean, here are people who have dedicated themselves to fulfilling the Great Commission. It's everything God is about. By God's grace, the Bell's Palsy has cleared up; little Nathan is doing fine with his artificial eye; and they're off to Belgium. But we'd still have to agree that it really doesn't make much sense.

A missionary was here at our church several years ago, and he challenged families or individuals to take on an unreached people group—to pray for the Bible to be translated into their language. Our family thought that sounded like a good idea for us to do together as a family. So we wrote to the missionary organization, and they sent us the name of an

unreached people group. We were the only family that had this particular group. It was a people group with no gospel witness, where there was no missionary and no Scripture in their own language.

So, as a family, we took the project on and we prayed for the Dunn people in West Africa. We would receive periodic updates from the missionary organization. After a couple of years, we started receiving word that God had laid it on the heart of a young missionary couple by the name of Jeff and Faye to go to the Dunn people. We were pretty excited about that, which was a very real answer to our prayers. So we continued to pray, and on the correspondence we were given an email address. Our girls emailed Jeff and Faye and the couple emailed back. We corresponded back and forth, and we found out that Jeff and Faye had gone to the tribe where they were going to live and began building a house.

We were kept up-to-date on all of their plans. They would move into the house, they would learn the language, and they would begin to proclaim the Gospel. It was exciting for our family, because it looked like the answer to our prayers was right around the corner. A couple of months passed, and we didn't hear anything. Then we received a letter, which said that Jeff and Faye and their two little children had moved into their house. But the day after they moved in, Faye contracted some sort of a virus, and in 48 hours she was dead. Jeff took the two little children and went back home.

How do you explain that? That's pretty hard to explain to your children. Where is God in all of this? What sense does it make? And the answer is: I don't know. I don't know what sense that makes.

We don't like discussions like this because we want to believe that, if we commit ourselves to God and walk in obedience to Him, that things like this won't happen. But we don't have that guarantee. We don't have that promise. The fact is, sometimes it does happen. Sometimes there are things that happen to us or to our children that simply cannot be explained or understood.

Sometimes we try to explain the unexplainable. We want to take theological bumper stickers and slap them on people's suffering to try to make it go away. We say, "We know all things work together for good," as if that's somehow supposed to make the pain go away.

Well, that is what Psalm 88 is all about. Psalm 88 is dark, sad, and despairing. It's a psalm of lament. Most of the psalms of lament go down and down and down... and finally, at the end they swing up. But Psalm 88 never swings back up—it just ends at the bottom. The last word is darkness, and both the reader and the writer are left in darkness.

You have to wrestle with the question: Why did God put Psalm 88 in the Psalter? Why did He put it in His Book? It isn't very flattering about God. Here is somebody crying out to God who believes God has made his life miserable and blames God for that and is angry with God. And there is no answer. So why did God put it here? Apparently, there is something about God that we need to learn; and maybe there is something about ourselves we need to learn from this particular psalm.

Before we dig in and look at Psalm 88, I want to read you some quotes of what some other commentators have said about this psalm. One said, "This is the saddest prayer in the Psalter." Another wrote, "It is the gloomiest psalm found in the Scriptures." Another

describes it as “the saddest, darkest psalm in the Psalter. It is one wail of sorrow from beginning to end.” Another said, “Psalm 88 stands as a witness to the intent of the psalms to speak to all of life, to remind us that life does not always have happy endings.” Another wrote, “The psalm is a scandal to anyone who isolates it from the biblical canon, a pain to anyone who must hear it apart from more lively words. Whoever devises from the Scriptures a philosophy in which everything turns out right has to begin by tearing out this page of the volume.” (From *Psalms, Vol. 2* by James Montgomery Boice, p. 716)

With that in mind, turn to Psalm 88, written by Heman, the Ezrahite. I’m not exactly sure who he is—one of the sons of Korah, which were men who led worship in the Temple. It begins with the words: “O LORD, the God of my salvation...” This is a very important opening statement. “O LORD”—all caps—tells us that it is Yahweh. It is Jehovah. It is the covenant-keeping God. It’s the God who keeps His promises—the God who has made promises to us. That’s Yahweh; that’s Jehovah. He is the God of the psalmist’s salvation. Those are the most positive words in the entire psalm—they are the *only* positive words in the entire psalm. But in those words, there is a flicker of hope. You will see, as we go through the psalm, that this psalmist is in great despair. But in the midst of all that, there is this flicker of hope because he has a covenant-keeping God who has promised—who is the God of his salvation.

I remember one time asking my mom, “How did you make it through all those years of my dad’s suffering—day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year—for over 20 years?” I said, “How did you do it?” She said the same thing the psalmist said. She said she believed every day that God might do a miracle. Every day! Every day it was possible that God could bring healing. And so, a day at a time...every day...there was this flicker of hope. She said sometimes she would be in the kitchen doing dishes, and she believed with all her heart that my dad was going to walk in and give her a hug. It was just enough to get her through one day at a time. That prayer was never answered. But that doesn’t mean it couldn’t have been—because healing my dad was never beyond God’s ability. So every day there was a reason for hope.

That is how the psalmist opens his psalm. There is this glimmer of hope in the midst of such despair. He says, “O LORD, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before Thee.” That word *cried* isn’t what we typically might think of. It’s a word that means a shrill cry. It would be used to describe an animal that’s been caught in a trap. It’s a very graphic term—a term of intense suffering or intense anguish.

Verse 2: “Let my prayer come before Thee. Incline Thine ear to my cry! For my soul has had enough troubles...” That Hebrew word *enough* means saturated. It is saying, “my soul is saturated with troubles, and my life has drawn near to Sheol.” Sheol means “the grave.” In other words he is saying, “I’m about to die.” We would say, in our language, “I’ve come to the end of my rope. I’ve reached my limit. I’ve taken all the troubles I can take. I’m just ready to die.”

Verse 4: “I am reckoned {*I am counted*} among those who go down to the pit. I have become like a man without strength.” When he talks about the pit there, he is using a very negative term that means a hole, or dungeon, or prison. The Hebrew people put a lot of emphasis on how they were buried—how they were cared for when they died. It was kind of a statement of honor in reference to how they lived, and their worse nightmare was to be buried improperly. The psalmist is saying, “I feel like I’m just going to die, and I’m just

going to be thrown in the pit, and somebody is going to throw dirt over me.” And he says, “I don’t even have enough strength to do anything about it.”

Verse 5: “Forsaken among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom Thou dost remember no more, and they are cut off from Thy hand.” A lot of people think that this psalmist was a leper. That could very well be, because it certainly fits with what he says in the psalm. If that’s the case, then because of that, he was removed from the community of people and put out in a leper colony with other lepers. So he would say “forsaken among the dead.” In other words, “I just live among people who are dead and dying.”

And then he says he feels “like the slain who lie in the grave.” That’s a wartime imagery of when there would be multiple casualties, when they would just simply dig a big pit and anonymously put one body after another in this pit and cover it with dirt. With this imagery, he’s further developing this concept of his fear of being thrown in this pit. He says, “It’s just going to be like at wartime, and I’m going to die. Nobody is going to know who I am, and they’re going to throw me in this pit and throw some dirt over me, and nobody will even know.”

Verse 6: “Thou hast put me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths. Thy wrath has rested upon me. Thou hast afflicted me with all Thy waves.” Notice in verse 6 that he begins to blame God for all this. He doesn’t really beat around the bush. He says, “God, you’ve done this to me. You’ve thrown me in the deepest pit. You’ve afflicted me.” As a matter of fact, he says it just feels like one wave after another of affliction that keeps coming across him.

Somebody once said it is not the sharpest, but the longest trials, that are the hardest to bear. I think that’s exactly right. There are some things that come on us which are very sharp, and when they hit us, they knock the wind out of us. But quickly we recover, and life goes on. It’s very different from those things that just linger, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. It feels like is it just coming, one wave after another, and it beats him down, and that’s how he describes it.

Verse 8: “Thou hast removed my acquaintances far from me; Thou hast made me an object of loathing to them; I am shut up and cannot go out.” Again, if he were a leper, then people would not really be able to come out and see them. But he is saying that, even when they came out, he sickened them: “I was an object of loathing to them. They couldn’t even stand to look upon me.” So now he doesn’t even have any acquaintances. He says he is “shut up and cannot go out”—he feels like he’s imprisoned with this thing.

Verse 9: “My eye has wasted away because of affliction; I have called upon Thee every day, O LORD, I have spread out my hands to Thee.” I find this to be a very disturbing imagery because he is painting the picture of a child. When a child is frightened or hurt, a child reaches their arms out to the parent, so that the parent, with love and compassion, will reach down and pick up that child. That’s what he is talking about here. He says, “Every day, LORD, I reach out my hands like a frightened child, waiting for a loving parent to reach down and to pick me up and to love me.” But he says every day he cries out and he hears nothing—there’s no response.

In verses 10, 11, and 12 the psalmist tries to figure it out. Everything that God wanted from His people had to do with being alive and able to do those things. The psalmist is trying

to reason this out, and he says, “You know, God, I don’t understand this at all. Everything that you want from us, I can’t give you because of what you’ve done to me.” Logically, he is saying, “Why would you do that to me? Why would you put me in a place where I can’t even do what you want me to do? It makes no sense.”

So each of these questions, of course, expects no answer. “Wilt that perform wonders for the dead?” And the implied answer is, *Of course not*. “Will the departed spirits rise and praise Thee? Will Thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave, Thy faithfulness in Abaddon?” That was taken from what they believed to be the angel of the Abyss, and this was a form of that name, which just came to mean “place of destruction.” “Will Thy wonders be made known in the darkness? And Thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?” The psalmist is trying to figure it out. He is questioning, “God, why would you do this to me? I can’t do anything that you want your people to do. This makes no sense.”

That’s the same thing we do when we suffer. We try to figure it out; we try to come up with a reason. We wonder, *Why does it have to be this way?* Somehow we think we can get God off the hook if we can come up with some sort of legitimate reason. And sometimes we are well-meaning, but we are careless and we try and make something up. We try to slap some theology on it in order to just kind of get God off the hook, which only adds further suffering to those who are already feeling the pain. Sometimes we just need to say, “I don’t know... I don’t know why.”

I know people like to say, “Someday it will all make sense.” I don’t find anywhere in the Bible we’re promised that someday God is going to explain all this—that it’s all going to make sense. Sometimes we just don’t know. And I think one day, when we stand before God, we won’t need to know. But for now, we are like the psalmist. We just try and figure it out, and it makes no sense whatsoever.

Verse 13: “But...” Here’s a term of contrast that’s very important. The psalmist has said he’s in agony. He’s in despair and he’s ready to die. He’s clearly angry with God, and he’s blamed God for this. He is saying, “God, you did this to me, and I can’t understand why you would do it to me. But...” Here is the contrast: “But I, O LORD, have cried out to Thee for help, and in the morning my prayer comes before Thee.” The psalmist is saying, “God, I don’t understand why you do this to me—it makes no sense. I’m angry with you. But there is nowhere else to turn.”

The psalmist could have turned and walked away. I’ve met a lot of people who have done that when things don’t go the way they think they should go. People go through significant suffering, and in their anger, they just turn their back and walk away, saying, “God, if that’s the way you are going to be...” But what does that accomplish? You’ve walked away from the one glimmer of hope that remains. The psalmist knows that, and even though he doesn’t understand it, and even though he is angry with God, there is nowhere else to turn. There is no other god that can deliver the goods, so he says, “God, I still cry out. I still keep coming back to you. You’re the only one who can deliver me.”

Verse 14: “O LORD, why dost Thou reject my soul? Why dost Thou hide Thy face from me? I was afflicted and about to die from my youth on; I suffer Thy terrors; I am overcome.” Apparently he has had this affliction (whatever it is) since he was young, so this is something he’s had for years. As a matter of fact, he says life has been characterized by

terrors, and he says, “God, these terrors are from you.” Now he is overwhelmed. He has reached his limit, and he can’t take anymore.

Verse 16: “Thy burning anger has passed over me; Thy terrors have destroyed me. They have surrounded me like water all day long; they have encompassed me altogether.” He sees this as the anger of God—the wrath of God. He sees this anger of God, the terror of God, as an ocean and he feels like he’s drowning in this ocean of God’s anger.

And finally, verse 18: “Thou hast removed lover and friend far from me; my acquaintances are in darkness.” Usually when we suffer and go through difficult times, we at least have a friend or family member—somebody to be with us to offer some comfort in our hours of despair. The psalmist says he has no one, because God has taken them away. He has no family, no friends, no acquaintances. He suffers in darkness. End of psalm. No resolution. No swing back up.

This isn’t exactly the kind of psalm you’d read to your unsaved neighbor. As a matter of fact, this is the kind of stuff that, when the critics get a hold of it, they say, “If your God is a god of love, where is He? How do you explain this?” It’s a pretty dark psalm—it’s pretty gloomy stuff. It reminds me a lot of the book of Job. As a matter of fact, Job very easily could have written this psalm, given the content.

In the very beginning of the book of Job, we’re privy to a perspective that Job doesn’t get—that there is this cosmic war going on between God and the enemy, and it directly affects Job. But Job isn’t told that. Job has no idea. All he knows is that he lost his family, his health, and everything he owned. His friends come along and they try and figure it out. They try and explain it and try to come up with reasons. Finally, Job’s wife says, “Job, curse God and die.” Job then starts to blame God and starts to try and figure it all out. And in chapters 38, 39, 40, God comes along and says, “Job, let’s have a talk here. Where were you when I hung the stars in space? Where were you when I breathed the universe into existence? Where were you when I raised up these mountains and created these waters?” And for several chapters, God is just saying, “Job, let’s get something straight here. I’m God; you’re not.” And the text says Job put his hand over his mouth and said, “I’ll be quiet now.”

What I find interesting about the book of Job is that it was the first book of the Bible that was written. Even though Genesis goes back to the beginning, Job preceded Moses, who wrote the book of Genesis. Job was the first book written. It was God’s first book of revelation to mankind. It is God’s way of saying, “By the way, I’d like to introduce Myself.” That’s an interesting introduction. In the very first book that was penned, it’s as if God was saying, “You just need to know that I’m God; you’re not. And there will be things in this life you’re not going to understand. There are going to be things in this life that aren’t going to make any sense. And you’re just going to have to learn to trust me.”

I mentioned before that the Hebrew people were very focused on this life, because their promises were very connected to this life. They had a literal piece of geography; they had a literal earthly kingdom, and they had literal earthly blessings, as God blessed them with crops and with rain and with health. They believed that good health and life were gifts of God’s blessing, and they believed that disease and dying were part of God’s judgment or wrath. So they were very focused on this life, and because of that, they had a very limited view of the life to come. As a matter of fact, it wasn’t a point of focus at all. And so the psalmist struggled with the affliction of this life

But as we experience what we call progressive revelation, which means the unveiling of the rest of God's revelation, we get into the New Testament and find there is a dramatic focus on the life to come. We are told this life isn't where it's at, at all. We're not citizens of Earth anymore. When we trust Jesus as Savior, we're citizens of Heaven. We're called aliens and strangers, and we are told we're just passing through. We are told not to get too connected to this life. And as God begins to develop this view of the life to come, it gives us hope. It gives us perspective.

It is interesting to me, when you read through the New Testament, to notice the books where the people were suffering the most (Thessalonians, for example). Those people were persecuted, and it was about to go from bad to worse under the hand of Nero. Their life was about to become a nightmare, and the overwhelming focus of the book is on the coming of Jesus. It focuses on Jesus coming to take you away—that there's going to be a better place—because those people needed that to endure what they were about to go through.

Sometimes when we suffer, what adds to our suffering is looking at all the things in this life that we're going to miss—all the things that will never be. So we look at the relationships and we look at the different things, and we wonder what life could have been like. That just adds to our suffering.

I think about my dad's 20+ years suffering in a bed. The things he missed weren't complicated. They weren't big dreams. He just wanted to go for a walk with my mom and hold her hand. He wanted to hug his children. He wanted to *see* his children. He wanted to go out in the front yard and toss a ball. But those were things he would never get to do. In 1982, after 20+ years of suffering, my dad died. It's been almost 20 years now—19 years that he has been with his Savior in glory. And over the years, the perspective continues to change. I'm sure, during those 20 years, it must have seemed like 120 years to them. But now, all there is left is glory. It doesn't make sense, but it all starts to gain some perspective.

I find after I read Psalm 88 that I need to go to Revelation 21, where I read about a place that's coming where there is no more pain...no more sorrow...no more questions... no more suffering. And I'm reminded that everything the psalmist wanted, he would get. He just didn't understand to the extent that we can understand, because of additional revelation, that there is a day coming when everything that he asked for would be given to Him.

I think it's fair to say sometimes there are things in life we cannot understand. There are things in life that make absolutely no sense. I think there are times in life when we become angry with God, and we are free to express that to Him. He can accept that. But I think one thing we cannot say is that God does not care. Because He settled that once and for all when God demonstrated his love, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We cannot question His love—He has demonstrated His love through His Son on the cross. Not only has God provided a place for eternity with no pain, no sorrow, no tears, but it cost Him the life of His own Son to get us there.

So there's no question that God cares. But the reality is, in this life, sometimes we are going to suffer. Sometimes the suffering is for a season...sometimes it's for a lifetime. None of us know what tomorrow holds. But we do know that, through Jesus Christ, we have been promised a life to come that's beyond anything that we can imagine. And whatever we would happen to miss on this earth, in the end, it is really nothing compared to what is to come.

A couple of weeks ago, I was out in my pasture spraying weeds. And my faithful companion, my dog, was right there with me. Whenever I'm outside, he feels like it's necessary to be right there at my feet... which is okay. But in this particular case, I was spraying a weed killer and thought it probably wasn't a good thing to spray the dog with, so I was trying to shoo him away. I also didn't want him running through the weeds I had already sprayed, because he'd get it all over him. So I'm shooing him away, and he's coming back... and I'm shooing him away... and he's coming back. He keeps giving me this puppy-dog look that says, "Why don't you want me here?" Finally, I got after him, and he put his tail between his legs and he just worked his way over and down to the yard. And I thought to myself, *There is no way that I can explain to him what I'm doing, why he can't be here, and why this is for his own good. I just can't. There's no way I can communicate that to a dog.*

As I thought about that, I wondered if that is sometimes how God feels? God sees our suffering. And as a loving, Heavenly Daddy, he'd love to be able to explain why it is the way it is. But He can't, because we're not God, and we don't have the mind of God. There's no way we could comprehend it, so He can't. Therefore, we have to trust Him in those hours of despair. We cry out to Jesus, our Savior, and we remember that there is coming a day when we will experience everything we've ever longed for. We have that promise. And so for now, we endure—we hang on—knowing that there is a better day coming.

Our Father, we are thankful that you are a faithful God. But Lord, those words don't always come easy. Sometimes it seems like life makes no sense. Sometimes it seems like we've been forgotten and abandoned. We try and figure it out, but there are no answers. God, help us to remember that, in those moments, there is still nowhere else to turn. You alone are the God of our salvation. Through your Son, Jesus, you have provided for us a place to come, unlike anything this world has to offer. And until that day, we endure... we hang on... we cry out to Jesus, the God of our salvation. God, give us the faith to trust You.