

In The Midst of Deep Darkness
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
February 20, 2022-PM Service
Chad Boorsma
Psalm 88

One of my third graders came to me a few weeks back during silent reading time, with a large book in his hand. He opened it and said to me, “Do you know where Waldo is?” For those of you who don’t know, the book *Where’s Waldo?* introduces readers to Waldo, a man dressed distinctively in red and white, who sets off on a world-wide hike. He travels to everyday places – such as the beach, the ski slopes, and the zoo. The book features 2-page spreads of the locations, and somewhere amidst the extremely crowded scene, is Waldo. Readers are asked to scour the detailed illustrations to find the lost traveler. It’s like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Perhaps some of you have experienced something similar when you’ve dropped something on the kitchen or bathroom floor, like a small pill, and the pill is similar in color to the floor. You don’t see it, so you feel with your hands or maybe grab a flashlight or the light from your phone. Perhaps you even locate a ruler or a yardstick to see if the pill slipped beneath the stove or refrigerator. Locating the pill can be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

When we read God’s Word, we are often searching as well, searching for good news. So much darkness and dismay fills our world that we long for words that lift our spirit. We long for a message of hope that cuts through the darkness. In our Psalm tonight, finding good news is not easy. It’s hard work. It, too, is like searching for a needle in a haystack.

The psalmist in Psalm 88 certainly does not have much uplifting news to share with us. What is causing his downcast spirit? It’s hard to say for sure, but there is certainly no lack of complaints from him. He says he is without strength (verse 4). He says he is suffering from grief (verse 9). He says he is lonely and cut off from others (verses 8 and 18). Perhaps one of his more frequent complaints, though, is about death (verses 3, 5, and 15). “My life draws near to death,” he moans, and “I am set apart with the dead.” The dead are forgotten, cut off, and silenced, and our author feels he is experiencing a punishment like theirs.

Are his concerns valid? Perhaps, but many commentators also think he using a bit of hyperbole, exaggerating the details because he is feeling so down, so discouraged, and so depressed. Look, for example, at verse 15. He says, “From my youth I have suffered and been close to death.” He’s been close to death most of his life? Probably not. As the readers of this Psalm, however, we should not be so quick to dismiss his complaints. This is a person, for whatever reason, who is in a seriously dark spiritual state.

We should also note who he blames for so much of his trouble. Look with me at just a few of these verses: “You have put me in the lowest pit” (verse 6). “. . .you have overwhelmed me with all your waves” (verse 7). “You have taken from me my closest friends” (verse 8). “Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me (verse 16). Where does our psalmist point his finger? He places all the blame upon God. And when we consider the questions he asks in verses 10-12, we hear a barrage of rhetorical questions similar to what a person might hear in a prison interrogation room.

While Old Testament scholars estimate that two-thirds of the Psalms include some type of lament, most of them also include at least a verse or two of hope and good news. Take Psalm 4, for example, the one we sang a portion of during our prayer tonight. It, too, is a psalm of lament, but listen to the last verse of it, words penned by David: “In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety” (verse 8). Contrast that with the final words of Psalm 88: “. . .darkness is my closest friend.” Author and Tim Keller says it’s like saying, “Darkness is a better friend that you are, God.” To be sure, there is no sadder prayer in the Psalter than number 88.

Many of us can think of families and individuals who have experienced sadness like that experienced by the psalmist. They may have suffered from a broken marriage, multiple cancer diagnoses, or perhaps too many deaths in a short amount of time, like some in our own church family. I also recall a member of a former church who experienced trial after trial in her life. First her daughter-in-law was tragically killed. Next her husband died from cancer. This was followed by the death of her grandson-in-law who was killed while on duty as a police officer. The police officer’s wife, this woman’s granddaughter, battled cancer for many years

until she finally succumbed to the disease in her early 40's. This woman could have easily said, "I am overwhelmed with troubles. Darkness is my closest friend."

Most of us, praise God, have not experienced trials quite this severe in our lives. However, haven't we all felt a bit like the man who wrote this psalm? Have we feared death when health problems persist or when we haven't felt quite right for some time? Have we experienced loneliness after our spouse dies and friends drift away who once were close to us? Have we used a bit of hyperbole when "everything" seems to be headed in the wrong direction?

Life can be hard at times—let's be honest—and darkness, even for believing Christians, can last a long time. One of the lies, though, that some people believe is that if they give their lives to Jesus, they will no longer experience dark times. There's a hymn written by Isaac Watts entitled "Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed" that many of you are probably familiar with. In some hymnals, though, the hymn is called "At the Cross" because it includes a refrain, and that refrain, written by a different author, includes these words: "At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light and the burden of my heart rolled away. It was there by faith, I received my sight, and now I am happy all the day." Don't misunderstand me—if Jesus Christ is our Savior, we should have joy in our hearts, but just because we belong to Jesus does not make us "happy all the day." In fact, in John 16:33, Jesus tells us that we will have trouble in this world, and in the Garden of Gethsemane, even Jesus was troubled in spirit.

So who is this psalm's author, the one who is also troubled in spirit, the one who seems to think his life is pointless? According to the notes beneath the Psalm's title, the one who penned this psalm is Heman the Ezrahite. Who was Heman the Ezrahite? 1 Chronicles 6 tells us that there were men that David put in charge of the music in the house of the Lord after the ark came to rest there, and the leader at the top of that list in 1 Chronicles 6 is Heman, likely the same Heman that wrote Psalm 88. He was a musician, the son of Joel and the grandson of Samuel. He was one of the pioneers of the singing guilds, the Sons of Korah, to which we owe the Korahite psalms: Psalms 42-49, 84-85, and 87. These are some incredibly rich songs of the Bible, songs that Heman probably had a hand in crafting. Despite feeling cut off and remembered no more, Heman was used by God in marvelous ways for his kingdom. His life was far from pointless.

And as we search for a glimmer of hope in the midst of the gloom of this Psalm, the needle in the haystack, so to speak, we should first notice that the psalmist does not forget to whom he is praying. At the very beginning of the Psalm we read: "Lord, you are the God who saves me." Commentator, Derek Kidner, says that this could be translated literally as: "God of my salvation, I cry out to you." Despite all the anger and accusations that the author makes in this psalm, he still knows and acknowledges that God is the God of his salvation. This, my friends, is good news. We, too, need to remember who our God is.

What does the psalmist do with the God of his salvation? Take a look at the text: "Day and night I cry out to you," (verse 1); "I call to you, Lord; every day I spread out my hands to you" (verse 9); and "But I cry to you for help, Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you" (verse 13). You would think someone who is in such a state of mind would simply throw up his hands in despair or perhaps turn to some other source to bring him comfort, to ease his hurt—especially when he thinks his prayers are unanswered—but that's not what happens. Heman keeps praying--praying to the God of his salvation. His prayers may not be the perfect model for us, but he keeps praying.

That's also what happened to the woman I knew at a previous church. Testimonies at her memorial service confirmed that she felt like she was in the pit during those years, like she couldn't sink any lower, but she continued to pray, continued to look to the God of her salvation, and that is what led her through the deep waters.

It seems that Heman also thinks that he can't sink any lower, that he is experiencing complete and total darkness at this time in his life, but that is not true. If we are believers in Jesus Christ, we can take comfort that there *is* one who actually did experience complete and total darkness. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we hear Jesus pray: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." Then on the cross, we hear his voice cry out in great pain, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus received the total darkness that Heman thought he was getting, and only Jesus received that complete darkness because he took our sins upon himself. Tim Keller says, "Darkness was Jesus' only friend, so in our darkness, we can know that Jesus is still our friend."

Heman prayed during the dark times. Jesus prayed during the dark times, and it is something that we need to do as well, for God is there in the midst of the gloom, even when we can't feel it. When things are not going the way we had hoped, we need to keep praying. When the enemy appears to be gaining strength in this world, we need to keep praying. When darkness appears to be our closest friend, we need to keep praying.

Let us consider again some of Heman's questions, this time in light of Jesus' victory over the grave. God, do you show your wonders to the dead? Yes, he does. God, do their spirits rise up and praise you? Yes, they do. God, is your love declared in the grave? Yes, it certainly is. As Paul wrote, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:55, 57).

So why did God include this psalm in the canon, where it would be read, sung, and recited for years? It shows us what to do in the midst of deep darkness. We tell the God of our salvation about our despair and our sorrow. Prayers in the dark, like those of Jesus, are more victorious than they appear. Amen.

© Chad Boorsma