

## Trusting God in the Darkness

### Psalm 88

Many years ago a friend took me deep inside an underground cave. I had never experienced anything like it. The entrance was very small but once we got inside the cave opened up. It was muddy and slippery but we kept walking farther and farther inside. After about 30 minutes we stopped and turned off our flashlights. We experienced utter darkness. Our eyes kept trying to find light but it was pitch dark. Pretty soon my eyes played tricks on me and I thought I saw light but there was none. I literally couldn't see the hand in front of my face. I couldn't walk. I couldn't make sense of what was around me. It was hard to last 3 minutes in true darkness. But sometimes God asks us to walk a long time in the dark. And this led us to Psalm 88.

In this session I want us to look together at the most painful of all the lament psalms. One commentator says **this psalm is “the darkest, saddest Psalm in all the Psalter. It is one wail of sorrow from beginning to end”** (Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, 140). Some might wonder why God chose to include such a dark psalm in sacred Scripture and wonder how it is helpful. I would suggest that those who raise such questions have perhaps never been in darkness themselves. But you Congolese are living through some of the worst pain and evil in the world right now and I believe it will be very helpful to let another brother's journey in the darkness give you direction and hope. I find **4 really helpful lessons in this psalm for those experiencing painful dark trials.**

Read Psalm 88

This psalm teaches us that:

#### **1. Godly believers can experience deep darkness, v. 1-3**

Notice his pain is continual—he cries out day and night (v. 1). His soul is “full of trouble.” He is overwhelmed with pain and feels he is about to die (v. 3-4).

When believers experience tragedy they often ask if God is punishing them or wonder if they simply don't have enough faith. I have often had Congolese ask me if God has cursed the DRC.

Only God knows why some people experience extreme levels of suffering and evil. No, even the godly can experience deep darkness which may last a long time. Notice from the title of this hymn that it is written by Heman the Ezrahite of the sons of Korah. We read about Korah in Numbers 16. He led a rebellion against Moses and ultimately against God. So, God literally caused the ground to open up and swallow him into Sheol. But not all his sons died (Num 26:11). Apparently, they broke with their father and didn't join him in his rebellion. This family had a very prominent role in leading the people in worship. The sons of Korah wrote eleven of the Psalms (42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88), some of the most beautiful psalms expressing faith in God. Heman was in this family and he was appointed as one of the special worship musicians during the reign of King David (1 Chron 15:16-17). Heman was praised for his great wisdom (1 Ki 4:31). So, the writer of Ps 88 was a very godly man who served God faithfully and yet he suffered greatly. He experienced great emotional and spiritual pain. His life was in great danger. And it wasn't his fault. He didn't cause the darkness he experienced.

Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) was a missionary to Burma (Myanmar) for almost 40 years. He and his new bride went there in their early 20s knowing it would be very difficult. The other missionaries who had gone to Burma had all died or left. He labored for 6 years before seeing just one convert. They studied the language twelve hours a day for 3 years to be able to communicate with the locals. It took six years to see just one person come to Christ. After 11 years war broke out between Burma and Great Britain and even though he was American and not British, he was white so the king thought he was a spy. He was imprisoned and tortured for 18 months. When he was finally released his wife lay dying at home. Their child died. Then he received word that his father had died. He went into a deep depression and spent 40 days in the tiger infested jungle. He stated, "God to me is the great unknown. I believe in him but I can't find him." All three of his children from his first wife died. His second wife died. He lost 7 of his 13 children. At the age of 61 Judson became very ill and was sent to France for medical care but died at sea. Judson was a very godly man but experienced deep darkness. His story is not over and I'll come back to it, but Adoniram Judson gives a powerful example of a godly man who experienced great darkness for a long time.

## **2. Darkness can cause us to lose perspective, but God is still with us v. 4-12**

Notice what Heman experienced in the darkness and his extreme statements:

- He feels like a dead man walking (v. 5)
- He felt God no longer cared for him (v. 5 “like those you remember no more”)
- He felt that God was punishing him (v. 6-7)
- He felt isolated from and rejected by others (8)
- He felt that God was no longer working on his behalf. In fact, he makes statements that are not true but it is what he felt—God doesn’t work wonders for the dead (v. 10). God’s love isn’t declared from the grave (v. 11). God’s wonders aren’t known in the darkness (v. 12). It’s hard to believe that this is Scripture but it is. It shows us how gracious God is to his children when they suffer. It shows us that God wants us to be honest with him in our prayers. He understands our weakness and wants our honest hearts.

God was with Heman. He lived to write this psalm. And God is with us today even when we cannot see him in the darkness. Judson suffered much throughout his life, but later on he was able to say, “If I had not felt certain that every additional trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated suffering.” He eventually was able to see that God has been with him in darkest moments.

### **3. God does some of his best work in the darkness v. 13, v. 1**

How do I know this? For one thing, over 2500 years after Heman wrote this psalm, people are reading it and God is still using it. I don’t believe there is any way Heman could have known this when he wrote this painful psalm. And there is no way you and I can know how God is working when we are in the depths of pain and suffering.

One of the strongest ways we can spite Satan is to keep trusting God in the darkness. He shows him to be the liar that he is—see Job 1:11; 2:5. Notice how the psalms starts this psalm in v. 1 “O Lord, God of my salvation.” What an incredible act of faith and a defeat of Satan’s strategies.

God is always working on our behalf though most of his good work we won’t see until we get to glory. Let’s come back to Adonirum Judson. MTS has partners in Myanmar who are faithfully serving Jesus. They bless and encourage us. The church there is very strong, with some over 3

million believers. And they have a Bible in their language. Do you know why? Because almost 200 years ago Adoniram Judson went there and faced incredible darkness and suffering. He had no idea in his lifetime that God would use his ministry in such amazing ways. But God has. And they still use the Bible he translated, a work which took 24 years to complete. God is working in the DRC right now in ways we can't possibly see. And it may not be seen for years to come. But God is working.

#### **4. Jesus is our true hope in the darkness, v. 14-18**

The word in Ps 88:14-18 might sound somewhat familiar to you because centuries after he wrote them Jesus said very similar things. Look at how amazing this is. Heman felt abandoned by God, shunned by his friends, and in darkness. But Jesus experienced the ultimate abandonment, shunning, and darkness.

- **Jesus was truly abandoned (“my God my God why have you forsaken me?”) so that we would never be abandoned (Rom 8:31-39)**
- **Jesus was shunned by his family, friends, religious leaders, and fellow tribe members so that we could be eternally welcomed (v. 18; 1 John 3:1)**
- **Jesus experienced the ultimate darkness so we would have the light of life (v. 18; John 1:4-5)**

There is no other hope for us or for the Congo right now. Heman lived centuries before Jesus so he didn't understand this hope. But we do. We must cling to him.

#### **Conclusion**

The situation in the DRC is very dark right now. You may feel much like Heman did. I close by reminding us that because of Jesus we know the darkness will not last forever. God is working. Keep being faithful. Keep lamenting honestly to God. Trust that your sacrifices will not be in vain. I'll close with a final quote from Adoniram Judson, “*There is no [ministry] success without sacrifice. If you succeed without sacrifice it is because someone has suffered before you. If you sacrifice without success it is because someone will succeed after.*” Thanks for your great sacrifices. God sees them. He sees your suffering. He will honor your labor and your pain.

