

Guest Preacher - Rev Hugh Ferrier

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Preacher: Rev. Hugh Ferrier

[0 : 00] Well, friends, would you turn with me, please, to the words we read there in Psalm 88, Psalm 88, and looking again at verse 18. Psalm 88 and verse 18.

At the very end, we read these words, My companions have become darkness. My companions have become darkness.

William Cowper, or Cooper, was an 18th century poet who composed hymns such as There is a Fountain Filled with Blood and Oh, for a Closer Walk with God, hymns that are still precious to many today.

But he also knew seasons of terrible discouragement and despondency. And on one occasion, he composed the harrowing poem, The Castaway. Here he imagines, he tells the story of a sailor who's washed overboard in a storm.

His friends desperately try to throw him something to hold on to, but to no avail. The ship is unable to stop, and after an hour of toiling and calling out in vain, the sailor sinks beneath the waves.

[1 : 14] And in the last two verses of the poem, Cowper applies the situation of the sailor to himself, Where he says, But I therefore purpose not or dream, descanting on his fate, To give the melancholy theme a more enduring date.

But misery still delights to trace its semblance in another's case. No voice divine, the storm allayed, no light propitious shone. When snatched from all effectual aid, we perished each alone.

But I beneath a rougher sea, Enwhelmed in deeper gulfs than he. William Cowper was a Christian who knew what it was to be in a very, very dark place.

Well, this evening I want us to look at what we might call the bleakest psalm in the Psalter, but it's a psalm that displays a functioning faith. A faith that functions even in the depths, even in the darkness.

We'll look at it under three headings. The acknowledgement, the argument, and then the anguish. First, the acknowledgement. You see that in verses 1 and 2, where the psalmist acknowledges who the Lord is.

[2 : 27] We can begin by looking at the composer of the psalm. We're told that this is a song or psalm of the sons of Korah. We're also told that it's a mascal or meditation of Heman the Ezraite.

Now, this man, Heman, is mentioned in 1 Chronicles 6. He's the singer who was the son of Joel, the son of the prophet Samuel. So he was a man who had a godly grandfather.

He is also mentioned in 1 Chronicles 25 as one of David's musicians who prophesied with the lyre, with the harp, and with cymbals. He is a man who was very much a man of faith.

And after looking at the composer of the psalm, we can then hear his confession at the beginning of verse 1. Heman starts this song by addressing the Lord. Now, that word Lord, as I say so often to the high free congregation, isn't God's title.

This word Lord is God's personal name, his covenant name, Yahweh, Jehovah, I Am. And Heman acknowledges the Lord to be the God of his salvation.

[3 : 34] He recognizes the Lord to be the God who saves his people, rescues his people, delivers his people. And he declares the Lord to be the God of my salvation.

He is confessing the Lord to be the God who delivered him in the past, but didn't simply deliver him in the past, but will also deliver him in the future.

And after hearing this confession, we hear the cry in verses 1 and 2. Heman speaks about when he cries. Look at verse 1. He says that he cries out to the Lord, he brings loud shouts, piercing screams before the Lord, and he cries out to the Lord day and night.

He is persistent. He refuses to let up. He also speaks about what he cries. Look at verse 2. He cries out to the Lord to let his prayer come before him.

He cries out to the Lord to incline his ear to his cry. Heman wants the Lord to listen to him. He wants the Lord to pay attention to him.

[4 : 38] He doesn't want the Lord to dismiss him. He doesn't want the Lord to deafen his ear to his cries, to his shouts, to his screams. Now friends, as we consider these verses, we can see the confession of faith.

The confession of faith. That's what we see in Psalm 88. This man's faith is battered, it's bruised, it's bewildered, but it's still functioning.

He addresses the Lord and he acknowledges the Lord to be the God of his salvation. That is his only confession when his whole world has been turned upside down, when his life is disorientated.

And that is so important for us to think about this evening. The life of faith. The life of a Christian. The life of a pilgrim of heaven. It's about personal pronouns.

It's where a person can look to the God of the Bible and they confess, the Lord is my shepherd. It doesn't matter if he's a shepherd of someone else. The Lord is my shepherd.

[5 : 46] It's where a person can look to the God of the Bible and they confess, the Lord is my helper. The one who made heaven and earth. It's where a person can look to the God of the Bible and they confess, I am his and he is mine.

It's where a person can look to the God of the Bible and they confess, my Lord and my God. It's where a person can look to the God of the Bible and they confess, the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.

And in the case of Psalm 88, it's where a person can look to the God of the Bible and they confess, O Lord, God of my salvation.

It's all about looking to this God and saying, mine. I was listening to Ryan Stevenson's song, Still My God, recently.

It's a fairly modern song where he sings, Life can take our breath away. Tragedy can leave awake. Broken heart won't ever beat the same. Pain can stop us in our tracks, losing what we can't get back, shaking the foundations of our faith.

[6 : 59] No matter what's in my way, no matter the battles I face, you're still my God, you're still my rock, my only hope, Lord, you're all I've got. In every valley or mountaintop, I'll say hallelujah, you're still my God.

Sometimes the life of faith, the life of a Christian, the life of a pilgrim of heaven, is far from easy. And many of you tonight know this. Many of you have experienced this.

We go through frowning providences, or we see loved ones going through frowning providences, and we don't feel the Lord's closeness. We don't feel the Lord's love.

We hear others speaking about how much they felt the Lord's closeness, how much they felt the Lord's love and their frowning providence. But we don't feel that.

We feel numb. We feel alone. But despite this, we have a confession of faith where we're able to say, I may not feel the Lord's closeness.

[8 : 07] And I may not feel the Lord's love. But I know, regardless of what I feel, I know that He is the God of my salvation.

Let me ask you this evening, friend, whoever you are, whatever you're going through, and however you're feeling, do you have a faith that confesses the Lord to be your God?

The God of your salvation? So that regardless of what you feel, you know that He is still your God and still the God of your salvation.

That's the psalmist's acknowledgement. But we move from the acknowledgement to the argument in verses 3 to 12, where the psalmist now presents his argument to the Lord.

Verses 3 to 9, we see the crisis that Heman is facing. He begins by drawing attention to his adversity. Look at verses 3 to 5. He says that his soul, his life is full of troubles.

[9 : 23] That word full is often used to describe the satisfaction that a person feels after a good, healthy, hearty meal. They feel that they cannot eat anything more. But here we find Heman saying that his soul, his life is full, and it's full of troubles.

He's had more than enough trouble, more than enough difficulty, more than enough affliction. He cannot take any more. And he gives an outline of the trouble, the adversity that he's going through.

He says that his life is drawing near to Sheol, the underworld. He says that he's counted among those who go down to the pit. He says that he's a man who has no strength.

He says that he's been set loose among the dead. He says that he's been left like the slain who lie in the grave, those whom the Lord doesn't remember and have been cut off from the Lord's hand.

Heman feels like a dead man walking. That's the crisis that he is going through. And after outlining this adversity, Heman presents his accusation. Look at verses 6 to 9.

[10 : 31] He starts to accuse. And he accuses the Lord of putting him in the depths of the pit, these dark and deep regions. He accuses the Lord of allowing his wrath to lie heavily on him and of overwhelming him with the waves of his wrath.

He accuses the Lord of causing his companions to shun him and of making him a horror to them. And as a result of this, Heman claims that he has been shut in without any way of escape, his eyes are dim with sorrow.

Heman feels like he's unable to move forward. He feels like he's boxed in in all corners, all sides. He feels that he cannot make one step. He feels that he cannot see because of all the tears in his eyes.

That is the crisis. But he's not finished. Because after outlining the crisis, he then presents his case to the Lord in verses 9 to 12.

Once again, he says that he calls on the Lord. Look at verse 9. In verse 1, he said that he cried out day and night to the Lord. And here he says he calls on the Lord every day.

[11 : 46] And as he calls upon the Lord, he spreads out his hands, his empty hands to the Lord. He's saying, I've got nothing. I am empty. I have nothing to offer.

I am spreading out empty hands to you. And the content of what he then says to the Lord is expressed in six questions. Look at verses 10 to 12.

Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the depart to rise up to praise you? Is your steadfast love declared in the grave? Is your faithfulness declared in Abaddon?

Are your wonders known in the darkness? Is your righteousness known in the land of forgetfulness? Now, as he asks these six questions, Heman is bringing, he is presenting an argument to the Lord.

Heman knows that the Lord has created him. And he knows that the Lord has created him for his praise, his honor, and his glory. He has created him to display his greatness in his life.

[12 : 51] And Heman is asking the Lord, how will your greatness be seen in my life if I die, if I go down to the pit? Heman is saying, Lord, please let me live so that you might be glorified in my life.

Please let me live so that you might be magnified in my life. He is arguing with the Lord. He's not just saying, Lord, I want to live. He's saying, Lord, here is why I want to live.

I want your greatness. I want your glory. I want your majesty to be seen in the continuing days that you give me. Well, friends, as we consider these verses, we can see the communication of faith.

The communication of faith. That's what we see in Psalm 88. This man's faith is battered. It's bruised. It's bewildered. But it's still functioning.

His difficult circumstances don't drive him away from the Lord. His difficult circumstances drive him. They draw him to the Lord. When his life has been left disorientated, when his whole world has been turned upside down, heman communicates with his God.

[14 : 10] And that's so important for us to think about this evening. In his commentary on Psalm 88, Jamie Grant writes, I'll say that again.

The very act of offering a prayer in a time of great despair and disillusionment with God is itself arguably the greatest act of faith.

Some of you know that I love the rock band U2. And their lead singer, Bono, has often written and spoken about his appreciation of the Psalms.

And in one interview, he said, Abandonment and displacement are the stuff of my favorite Psalms. The Psalter may be a font of gospel music, but for me, it's in his despair that the psalmist really reveals the nature of his special relationship with God honesty, even to the point of anger.

We all know, friends, don't we, that relationships are built and based on communication. And when the communication stops, the relationship begins to deteriorate.

[15 : 32] And not only does it begin to deteriorate, it can even be destroyed when the communication stops. A living faith, a functioning faith, talks to God, communicates with God.

It recognizes that He is the one who is sovereign over all things and that all things, even the difficult circumstances in which we might find ourselves, are still under His control.

And it doesn't say, well, I'm going to walk away and complain about this God and everything that He's doing. It says, I'm going to draw near to this God and I am going to complain to Him.

There's a difference. A dead faith complains about God, but a living faith, a functioning faith, isn't afraid to bring one's complaints to this God.

So let me ask you this evening, friend, whoever you are, whatever you're going through, and however you're feeling, do you have a faith that communicates with the Lord?

[16 : 42] Do you have a faith that communicates with the Lord? You may not be able to pray long, eloquent prayers. You may only be able to pray one sentence, but do you have a faith that communicates with the Lord?

That says, I'm going to bring my complaints to Him. I'm going to be honest to Him. I'm going to tell Him what I'm feeling. I'm going to tell Him what I'm going through.

Not because He doesn't know, but because I have a relationship with Him and I've got to tell Him about this. Well, third and finally, we come to the anguish in verses 13 to 18, where the psalmist now expresses his anguish to the Lord.

The psalmist expresses his anguish to the Lord, verses 13 to 18. Verses 13 and 14, we see the consternation of Heman. Once again, he says in verse 13 that he cries to the Lord.

Verse 1, he said that he cried out to the Lord day and night. Verse 9, he said that he called upon the Lord every day. Now in verse 13, he says that he cries to the Lord and that his prayer comes before the Lord.

[17 : 54] He prays to the Lord in the morning. And we see his consternation as he cries out to the Lord in verse 14. He asks the Lord why he keeps casting his soul away.

He asks the Lord why he keeps hiding his face from him. Heman is filled with dismay. He's been trying to communicate with the Lord and it feels like the Lord's just been pushing him away.

He's been trying to communicate with the Lord and it feels like the Lord's just putting his finger in his ears and saying, I'm not listening. I'm not paying attention to you right now.

And so Heman spells out his condition to the Lord in verses 15 to 17. Heman has been telling the Lord about the crisis that he's going through. His soul is full of trouble and he sees these troubles as having come not from some random happenstance but from the Lord's own hand.

He has then presented his case as to why the Lord should come through for him. If he dies, the Lord's wonders will not be seen and his praises will not be sung. If he dies, the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness will not be declared.

[19 : 05] If he dies, the Lord's wonders and righteousness will not be known. He has gone on to express his consternation about how the Lord has responded to him up until now.

He has been crying and crying and crying to the Lord and it feels like the Lord's just been brushing him off, pushing him away, turning a deaf ear to his cries, his screams, his prayers, his pleas.

And so all Heman can do now is just tell the Lord about his condition. That's all he's got left. He's got nothing more to say apart from we might put it this way.

He's saying, maybe my condition will arouse something of the Lord's sympathy, something of the Lord's care. And so he says, Lord, I've been afflicted and closed to death from my youth.

He goes on and says, Lord, I've been suffering your terrors and I've been left helpless. And then he says, Lord, I've been engulfed, I've been destroyed, I've been surrounded, I've been closed in by your wrath and by your dreadful assaults.

[20 : 11] That's my condition, Lord. Got nothing more to say. But he does have one final thing to say, doesn't he? Because having spelled out his condition, Heman speaks about his only companion at the very end of verse 18.

In all the other psalms of lament that we have in the Old Testament, there is a progression. It's a progression from sorrow to salvation. The psalmist will find themselves displaced, disorientated, and after calling on the Lord, they will experience his deliverance.

It doesn't happen in Psalm 88. Psalm 88 moves from sorrow to solitude. It moves from disorientation to the darkness.

Heman continues speaking to the Lord and he accuses him of causing his beloved and his friend, the people most precious to him, the people whom he needs most to just shun him.

And he closes with the words, my companions have become darkness. Or as some of your versions may have it, darkness is my closest or only companion.

[21 : 26] Well, friends, as we consider these verses, we can see the clinging of faith. The clinging of faith. That's what we see here in Psalm 88.

This man's faith is battered, it's bruised, it's bewildered, but it's still functioning. Because even in the solitude, even in the darkness, what is Heman doing?

He's still crying to the Lord. He is clinging on to the Lord even when his life has been left disorientated and his world has been turned upside down and he's not even seen answers to his prayers.

He's still clinging to the Lord. And that is so important for us to think about this evening. It's always wonderful to hear about answered prayers.

But this psalm teaches that a person can pray and pray and pray and their situation doesn't improve. Maybe it deteriorates.

[22 : 33] Perhaps some of you have known this. You prayed about something that you were going through and your situation worsened. Or perhaps you prayed about something that a loved one, a friend, a family member was going through and their situation worsened.

But you've not given up on the Lord. You've not walked away from Him. You've kept on clinging on to Him. A living faith, a functioning faith continues to desperately cling on to the Lord even in the darkness, even when you might feel that you've got nothing left.

Dale Ralph Davis puts it like this. What do you do when the Lord doesn't take you out of your pit? You keep clinging to Him.

You keep bringing your problems to Him. You keep persisting with Him because that's what faith is. Let me ask you this evening, friend, whoever you are, whatever you're going through, however you're feeling, do you have a faith that clings to the Lord even when you feel like your only friend is darkness?

But before we close, I want to focus on the comfort of the gospel. The comfort of the gospel. You see, the words of Psalm 88 find their ultimate expression.

[24 : 04] They find their ultimate fulfillment in the gospel. In the gospel, we find Jesus, the great singer of the Psalms, experiencing the wrath of God sweeping over Him as He dies for all the sins of all His people.

In the gospel, we find Jesus, the great singer of the Psalms, being abandoned by His friends, shunned by His friends, and left hanging where? In the darkness.

In the gospel, we find Jesus, the great singer of the Psalms, crying out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why do you cast my soul away?

Why do you hide your face from me? In the gospel, we find Jesus willingly, lovingly, sacrificially becoming the true and better human, the supreme singer of Psalm 88 as He secures the salvation of all His people.

And because of this, this Jesus can empathize with you and He can sympathize with you whatever you're going through, whatever you're feeling, whatever you're experiencing.

[25 : 13] He can empathize and He can sympathize. A number of years ago, a short story was published called The Great Silence.

And it goes like this. At the end of time, billions of people were seated on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrunk back. But some groups near the front talked heatedly, can God judge us?

How can God know about suffering were the questions being raised? How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world?

Before God could judge them, he should endure what they had endured. He should be sentenced to live on earth as a man. Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted.

Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges. Betrayed by a prejudiced jury.

[26 : 15] Convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured. And at the last, let him see what it really means to be terribly alone. Then let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died.

And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered a word. No one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served the sentence.

Tonight you might be sitting in this building and you're thinking to yourself, nobody knows what I'm going through. And that minister up in that pulpit certainly doesn't know what I'm going through.

And maybe nobody does. But the one who sits on heaven's throne, the God-man Jesus, has endured the darkest pit of all.

And he says to you this evening, look at me. Don't look at Ferrier. Don't look at anyone else in that building.

[27 : 23] Look at me. I know. I understand. I care. I've been there. And a day is coming when I will personally wipe all your tears away.

My friend, I hope that is a comfort and an encouragement to you this evening. Your darkness isn't unknown and not understood by Jesus, the God of your salvation.

He's the one who has and will rescue and deliver his people. And he has given, it's wonderful, isn't it? He has given you this psalm so that you might know that other believers have felt what you are feeling.

I love the hymns, but some of them are awfully joyful. Some of them are awfully jolly. Some of them are awfully light.

The Lord Jesus has given us this psalm so that we might know that other believers have felt what we are going through.

[28 : 45] That you might not feel that your life is all together and other believers have gone before you feeling that their lives aren't all together. But he has not simply given you this psalm so that you might know that other believers have felt what you are feeling.

But, and this is most wonderful of all, he has given you this psalm so that you might know that he has felt what you are feeling. And his great gentle heart goes out to you tonight.

You might be sitting in the darkness this evening. You might be thinking, darkness is my only friend. but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother and he says, I know, I understand, you're not alone.

Well, let's sing the words of this psalm together in closing. Psalm 88, the Scottish Salt Version. We'll sing verses 1 and 2 and then verses 15 down to 18.

That's on page 342. Psalm 88, page 342, saying verses 1 and 2, that opening stance and then verses 15 to 18.

[30 : 07] Lord God, my Saviour, day and night, before thee cried have I, before thee let my prayer come, give ear unto my cry, distressed am I and from my youth I ready am to die, the terrors I have borne and am distracted fearfully.

And to the end of this psalm, we'll stand if we're able to stand. Lord God, my Saviour, day and night, before thee cried, before thee let my prayer come, give ear unto my cry, distressed am I, from my youth, thy wedding I am to die, thy terror, hour and nuisance on ■■■■■ cal Wonka.

He has kept covet dis Projectman, the Pu psyche, thevo ■■■enn't the paradgu drinking news of thy wrath light over me doth go thy terrors great have cut me off did it pursue me so or warned about me every day like water they've did all and gathering together they have come passed my soul my friends thou hast put far from me and him thou did me love and those that might acquaint us where to darkness dast we move our God and our Father you know each and every one of us tonight and you know that there may be some in this place who feel they are bruised and battered and bewildered that their faith has been assaulted in all directions and yet oh Lord we pray that however we might be feeling and whatever we might be experiencing and going through we would each be able to leave this building with a confession that says the Lord is the God of our salvation that we would be able to leave this building knowing that whatever we might be feeling and experiencing and going through we're still communicating with our God presenting our arguments and our pleas and our petitions before our God before our God not because you're the one who doesn't know these things but because the mark of a living relationship with you is that it speaks with you may we be those oh Lord who leave this building knowing what it is to be clinging on to our God that even in the times when when we don't see our prayers maybe being answered the way that we want them to and even in the moments when our situation and circumstance may worsen we would continue to cling rather than walk away we pray above all that we would leave this building having been comforted by your gospel thank you that the Lord Jesus Christ

God in the flesh is the one who became the supreme singer of the Psalms the true and better Heman the one who endured the darkness the disorientation and displacement the shunning of friends and even felt your wrath sweeping over him in order that he might secure us so great salvation for his people and we thank you that he is the one who occupies heaven's throne so that whatever your people are going through this evening there is a great high priest who is sympathetic and can say with full meaning that he knows so may we leave this place encouraged in heart even as we have considered this bleak and dark psalm together that we would be parted knowing what it is to be under your blessing and under your benediction as we pray in Jesus name and for his sake

Amen Amen Thank you.