

Reading: Psalm 88:1-18

Theme: In the darkest depths.

I do not know what you thought as we read this Psalm! I want to use this Psalm, not to work through it, but to use it as a launchpad to deal with the question about those dark times we as believers can go through. This Psalm is not one that abounds with joy or praise, but is quite contrary to that! One Bible commentator (*Leupold using the AV*) says “*One matter at least all commentators who deal with this Psalm are fully agreed: it is the gloomiest Psalm found in the Scriptures. Expressed a bit more accurately there appears to be no relief from the dark hopelessness that marks the Psalm though the writer may have earnestly prayed to God. It does seem strange that a man would begin his prayer ‘O Lord, God of my salvation’ and then continue to the point where the last word is still ‘darkness’. The psalmist is as deeply in trouble when he has concluded his prayer as he was when he began it.*”

In this Psalm there is no indication, no glimmer of joy or comfort. It is one of doom, gloom and darkness. Within the Psalm it appears that his prayer does not get answered and the author, Heman, looks like he is left in despair. We do not know which Heman is the author for 2 are referred to in Scripture: 1 Kings 4:31 - a Heman who was a wise man; or 1 Chronicles 25:5 – a Heman who was a singer, a seer of David; but it could be another Heman completely that we have no reference to. Not only do we not know which Heman it is, we do not know his exact circumstances. What we know is that he was a man who trusted in God and was suffering - certainly inwardly, if not outwardly.

Though this is a dark and gloomy Psalm, I’m so glad, happy even, it is found in God’s word. I know from personal and pastoral experience that believers may go through something of such dark times, to a greater or lesser extent. The Lord has wisely recorded even this dark experience of a despairing child of His, to let us know

what others have been through and what we and others may wrongly fear is only our own personal experience and to know other believers have ever been through it! It also teaches us that being a Christian, someone who is trusted in God through the Lord Jesus Christ, is not an insurance policy against problems, depressions or despair of the darkest kind.

This Psalm records for us the dark despair of a child of God, one who knew the privilege of prayer, one who prayed long and hard, one who had known close friendship and fellowship, yet had no comfort at all from anyone or anything. His despair and darkness may have been occasions by physical ill-health, being away from God's people, being under tremendous pressures in life. Whatever the outward cause, his inward sufferings seem many times worse and probably was aggravated by his outward situation or vice versa.

The summary of how he feels can be found in the 2nd half of v6 "*in the darkest depths*" (NIV) or as AV and NKJV say "*in darkness, in the deeps*". I'm using the NIV expression as my title for this sermon and I want us to note some things about such an experience to help us should we go through some dark depths personally. I have 3 main headings to help us look at this subject:

1. Realise believers can go through the darkest depths.

This is important for us all to realise. While the Christian life is a life which knows great joys, great joy and peace in believing. Yet we are not immune from the common ailments of life physically or from inward or outward afflictions, trials, difficulties or dark times as a believer.

True believers can go through dark and barren times. This may happen to Christians of all ages and maturity. It can happen to those who are new Christians, who are full of their first love and desire into go on with their Saviour. This can really throw and confuse

them! It can happen to those who are growing as Christians or may even be mature Christians and may come as a body blow and cause great confusion as to what's happening. Such dark deeps are not necessarily an indication of backsliding, little faith, or secret sins. Some of God's choicest servants have experienced such dark times and these caused them to despair of life and even remove the desire to live.

King David expressed this in his own life, in a situation where he felt as if he was completely abandoned and he wrote Psalm 22 which starts off *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?"*

Elijah felt so low that he wanted to lie down and die as he felt his ministry was over, things were too much for him and he was a waste of space.

Job despaired of life and viewed death as a desirable means of release from his sufferings and anguish.

Asaph felt like this too - Psalm 77:7-9 *"Will the Lord reject for ever? Will He never show His favour again? Has His unfailing love vanished for ever? Has His promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has He in anger withheld His compassion?"*

Heman felt this in Psalm 88 and describes how he felt in v14-18 *"Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me? From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend."*

These all felt forsaken, low, despairing, yet God was with them, He had not forsaken, rejected or abandoned any of them. Yet they had no sense of God's presence, His help or His comfort or joy. We too

may experience such things to a greater or lesser extent, but if we are a child of God, we need to remember that not one of God's children in their life has ever been utterly forsaken by the Lord - except One and that One was His darling Son, the Lord Jesus, His equal, a co-member of the godhead. He was forsaken in this life so that all who trust in Him will **NEVER** be forsaken either in time or eternity.

If we do not have the Lord Jesus as our Saviour, then no matter how wonderful our life is, no matter how many joys or few sorrows we may have in life, then we will face an eternity in which we will be forever forsaken by God i.e. hell. Yet we are then not just left alone by God, but He will actively punish us and abandon us to this for all eternity.

Realise that believers can know these dark times in their own lives, but it is not an eternal forsaking and incredibly we might find our God loves us so much that He even allows us to go into such times...!

2. Consider how these dark times show themselves in a believer's life.

At different times, in different ways we may feel such dark depths and times come upon us. They may come upon us gradually or suddenly; we may only be touched by them or be taken down into the depths to different intensities. Much could be said, but I want us to briefly consider 3 ways dark depths can show themselves in and hit our lives as believers:

A. Unaware of God's favourable presence: this is perhaps one of the most prominent and painful features when we feel low, depressed, going through the dark depths. It feels like we have been abandoned by God. The Puritans used the term "desertion" as it describes a time when a believer feels deserted by God, cast off from Him. This is a terrible experience - we have glimpsed something of this already of through Asaph in Psalm 77 and Heman in Psalm 88.

Sadly, it is not confined to them and their lives. Countless children of God, young or mature believers have experienced and may even now be going through such. It causes all things in life to lose their appeal, their satisfaction and their value. John Wells, a Puritan writer, wrote this *“So it is with a gracious soul; wife is nothing, children nothing, estate nothing, friends nothing, all nothing when Christ is gone... Ah, Christ is to him all, and when Christ is gone... all is gone with Him: peace gone, joy gone, comfort gone, hope gone, faith gone, aye and heaven gone too in his thoughts, and what are all his enjoyments then but dross and dogs-meat, but trash and lumber!”*

If we feel or have felt like that, then take heart because you cannot miss what you had never known! It is because you know and love the Saviour that you miss Him near; it is because you have tasted the Lord is good, that His absence is noted. Those who are dead in their trespasses and sins will never miss the presence of the Lord. Only believers, children of God can feel this; only believers can have this ‘love sicknesses’ for Him and they love Him so much from the bottom of their soul and they are concerned to find Him again (Song of Solomon chapters 3 & 5...) There is much we could say on this, but enough to say that if we know His presence now, then we are to do all we can so as not drive Him away, but to seek to maintain His nearness and our delight in Him. If we have lost an awareness of Him near us, then we are to seek Him and Him alone; if we have no concern for the awareness of His presence then tremble and fear, for you may be unsaved or very, very backslidden. William Cowper wrote *“Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord? Where is the soul-refreshing view of Jesus and His Word? 3 What peaceful hours I once enjoyed! How sweet their memory still! But they have left an aching void the world can never fill.”*

B. No encouragements from the means of grace: the means of grace are those channels through which God gives us grace

encouragements, blessings and strengthens us. Means of grace would include personal Bible reading and prayer; meeting together for prayer, for worship, for hearing God's word, singing His praise and meeting around the Lord's table. Yet when we are in dark depths these things seem so useless, dry and barren. Prayer is hard and we even wonder if our prayers get past the ceiling! The Bible can seem a dry book and seems to help us very little; the services seem overly long and a waste of time to us - for we can be distracted and taken up with our own thoughts and feelings in our minds and hearts; we can be so much like this, that the very thing we need could be spoken on and we would not be paying attention, let alone benefit! In such dark depths we can neglect the means of grace, delay our recovery by starving our souls of the light, nutrition and warmth it needs in such dark times. Dark depths also show themselves by:

C. No help from past or present encouragements: we feel in total and utter darkness and sometimes we can subconsciously, even consciously, refuse to be helped, comforted by what God has done in, with and for us in time past and what He is doing for, in and with us at present and promises for the future!

In such times, verses of encouragement or comfort come our way and we may feel they do not apply to us or our situation! We may dismiss such verses as being fine in theory, but not in practice and certainly not for us! Christian friends may try to encourage us and it's of no use and we only sink lower. We can wallow in our darkness and we can say amazingly foolish things - like Asaph in Psalm 77:2b-3a "*at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted. I remembered you, O God, and I groaned;*" even remembering God causes us to groan. In dark depths we seem helpless and hopeless and we can even refuse to be comforted!

Someone may suggest that we count our blessings, so we sit down and count our blessings and end up doubting the genuineness of such

supposed blessings! We begin to doubt their value, even doubt our value also. We may be like Heman and feel that our next experience is death and that may be welcome to us! When it comes to fellowship with other believers at church, or prayer or Bible reading for ourselves - they seem so alien and we keep away from them and any situations where we have to be involved in such.

These are some of the ways being in dark depths can show itself. They are not the only ways, but other things are often variations within these themes.

I had hoped to finish this off with a 3rd point: **Some causes of dark depths** and to include in the 3rd point encouragements, remedies for our situation, but the notes I have jotted down would add about another 20 minutes or more to this sermon and probably put us all into a tail spin into dark depths! Let's try and end on a positive note about what we have seen so far, for surely there must be a positive note, light and warmth somewhere in all this!

Hebrew 4:14-16 points us to our Saviour, so that's what I'll do – His power, control, majesty, but especially to the reality that He is touched with the feelings of our infirmities – He knows and understands us, He knows we are flesh and blood and none of us are super Christians... He knows we hurt, struggle, are affected by things around and within us, have doubts and fears. Yet He allows us to experience down times, even dark depths. He is not taunting us, being harsh or cruel with us. In His care, love and wisdom He knows what He is doing – as we will hopefully see next time. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to go to the throne of grace to find mercy and grace to help us in time of need – even when in the dark depths. Asaph in Psalm 73 had a real wobbly time as he saw the ungodly prosper and he basically asks *“Is it worth going on living for and serving God?”* In that situation the Lord showed him an answer – when he used the means of grace, as he went into the

sanctuary, he understood the destiny of the wicked, the ungodly, the ones without God. I have noticed that non-Christians when in a time of trouble will go to church, but believes in times of trouble, stay away!

George VI, in his 1939 Christmas broadcast to the Empire, quoted a poem of Minnie Louise Haskins to all listening who were facing the uncertainty of war and those words are helpful to believers in dark times: *“And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: “Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.” And he replied: “Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.” So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.”*

The Lord through Isaiah said in 50:10 *“Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of His servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.”* What an encouragement – we may not be able to see anything but darkness, but we are still to walk in God’s ways, to rely, lean on our God with absolute confidence, for although we may not see Him, feel His presence, love or help, He always sees us, is with us, loves us and will help and deliver us when He knows the time is right, but until then He calls on us to keep on trusting Him even in the dark depths. We can trust our great God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit - even in our darkest time as He has not forsaken us and never will if we are His child. Our darkness is not dark to Him, for darkness is as light to Him (*so says David in Psalm 139:11-12*) and He will safely lead us all the way and we can go out into the current darkness and walk with Him.