

## **Reading:** Psalm 88

**Theme:** Some causes of the darkest depths.

Psalm 88 is classed as the gloomiest Psalm! We looked last time at what it was like to be in the darkest depths and noted we are to **1. Realise believers can go through the darkest depths.** We saw people like king David, Elijah, Job, Asaph as well as Heman were affected by such; that believers throughout history and we now can go through such dark experiences. Then we saw **2. Consider how these dark times show themselves in a believer's life.** We can be unaware of God's favourable presence in our lives; we can have no or little encouragements from the means of grace; there's no help or comfort from our past or present encouragements. I tried to give some positives and encouragements in the light of what it been said. We now move on to see: **3. Some causes of dark depths** also to include points of encouragements, remedies for our situation, some have been touched upon. Let's note 3 main things under this heading:

**A. Satan:** the devil will actively seek to discourage, to cause us to lose heart, assurance, confidence and joy. He will seek to undermine our faith, our trust and our hope. Make no mistake that the devil will always be active against God's people. Note he **cannot** rob us of our salvation, for we are eternally safe as a believer but he will try and make our Christian life and journey to heaven as miserable and pathetic as he can. He will cause great doubts to rob us of our joy, of our appreciation of all that our Saviour has done for us and will grind us down in our daily battles and trials. We need to have the whole armour of God on, we need the help of our Guardian, our Divine Comforter and Encourager. The evil one will seek to deceive us, trick us, trip us up and will attack us in a great variety of ways to bring us down and cast us into darkness of soul and outlook. A book I would recommend is "*Precious remedies against Satan's devices*" by Thomas Brooks

– a great Puritan writer and the Puritans were great physicians of the soul. The evil one will always use anything, anyone to bring us low and into darkness, one major way is:

**B. Ourselves:** in judo you are taught to use the other person's strength, speed and weight against them. The devil knows how to use our own bodies, minds and affections against us. Yet often he doesn't have to do anything but allow us to get on with tripping ourselves up by us forgetting we are flesh and blood, have real bodies, with real emotions and this animal part of us can influence us in so many ways for good or ill. We forget that the moment we are converted, when we come to faith in Christ that we are not made totally perfect; we still have real bodies influenced and affected not only by indwelling sin, but we have fallen natures which are fully subject to the curse pronounced there in the garden of Eden. We do not become supermen and superwomen, immune from any outside or internal influences, nor are our bodies made sin free, perfect - that is to come on the day of our resurrection.

We forget we are products of our nature and nurture. Society around us would still squeeze us into its mould and have us conform to its ways. We all have different personalities, some are obviously introverts, others are obviously extroverts, with most of us being a mixture of the 2. While our temperament, psychology and make-up do not make the **slightest difference at all in the matter of our salvation**, yet they influence and affect our actual experience of the Christian life and we must take that into account as we are examining our own life or try to help another struggling believer - we are all different.

We need to get to know ourselves - there is not a one-size-fits-all in our experience of the Christian life, for we can all react differently to situations we are in and the things that happen to us.

None of us are identical in every respect. We may hold the same beliefs, may be brought up with very similar backgrounds and yet we can react differently to things in life that come our way. What may influence and affect me, may not do the same for you and vice versa. We all have our ups and downs in life - the law of undulation; we all have pressures of some kind upon us and we can react differently to such. Some people can handle pain and pressure much better than others - whether physical, emotional etc. There is nothing wrong with that. It does not indicate a stronger or weaker faith. It is our constitution, our physical, emotional and mental make-up. Yes, there are times of great crisis when our faith carries us above it all and we are wonderfully helped by the Lord. Yet often our physical state impacts, has affects upon our spiritual state and condition.

In Psalm 88 Heman seems to be isolated from family and friends, in Psalm 42 and 43 the writer seems to be unable to get to worship with others. In both situations they are brought low because of it - whatever the reasons are behind them being isolated from fellowship. To be able to go to church regularly and have fellowship with God's people is a means of grace and like the old illustration of a coal falling out of a burning fire, going cold there on the grate on its own, so our failing to be regular at church can be a cause of our love for God to cool – but may be a symptom of something spiritually deeper seated. This can affect us when we start to return back to church as we can be cool or cold-hearted and so low as we have started to go into the depths.

Our physical health can impact on our mental well-being and our spiritual well-being. To be constantly in pain, to be on medication that causes us side effects, be unable to concentrate or not be involved in things as we once could, will also have an impact on us. While we are not to use those things as excuses when we could

be involved, we are not to let them drag us down. The devil will even use such times to accuse us and bring us low. At times we may be like Elijah - just worn out and we do not need to work harder, but to rest, eat wisely and sleep. If it's an illness we might need a tonic, or simple medication to help us overcome a disease that affects us e.g. a water infection in some people can cause their minds and emotions to go haywire!

Through the ages people's minds, mental well-being and balance have been affected. This may be due to a physical cause such as a severe illness affecting the brain; or it could be a "*short-circuiting*" of the neurons within the brain itself; it can even be a hormonal or chemical imbalance in the body or brain. All these things can affect our mental state - neuroses, depressions, mood swings, extreme highs followed by desperate lows. Such may cause us to be unaware of God and His presence, or to fear we are not saved, or fail to benefit from the means of grace, to get no help from past or present encouragements... etc., but a good rule of thumb is that if spiritual counsel and Scripture teaching does not help, then the problem is probably not spiritual and we need medical help for things affecting our body and mind. Let's leave that there, if you want to know more, I recommend reading "Spiritual Depression" by Dr Martin Lloyd Jones. Let's see a 3<sup>rd</sup> cause:

### **C. God Himself!**

That is quite a surprise; you were not expecting that! Yet the Lord does allow His children to go through such dark depths, not because He is a cruel ogre, but because He loves us truly. Sometimes this dark time is as a direct result of God's working, rather than sin in a believer e.g. Job. God is always working for our good - to educate us, shape us, make us more conformed to the image of His Son as He chips away all those things not

conformed to the image of His Son. What I want to do is to give headings with a few comments as to why God would deliberately take us through such times and we can discuss such things later.

**a. Out of His wise loving sovereignty:** our Lord will never cause any child of His a needless tear or grief. He loves us too much to leave us undisciplined and to go on as a spoilt child. He will work as He knows is necessary. He is almighty, all seeing, all knowing and He is all loving too. Do we think He will make a mistake with our lives? Can we seriously think that? Not at all! He is still wise, loving and sovereign even when we can't understand what's going on - that is especially true when we are in the dark depths. His wisdom is higher than the heavens. We may never know or understand what He is doing, but we can be assured and confident that He knows and still loves us.

**b. To teach us our utter dependence upon Him:** often we know that truth in theory, but in practice we rely upon our feelings, circumstances, joy, health, loved ones etc. We can presume on them as our right, resulting from our obedience and can easily be side-tracked to seek our satisfaction in them and them alone. God wants us to encourage ourselves in Him alone. The prophet Habakkuk learned this, so did John Newton on the death of his beloved wife Mary in December 1790 and he preached the following Sunday from Habakkuk 3:17-18 *“Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.”*

God wants all our love and affection. He doesn't want us to love the things He gives us more than Himself e.g. a new bride with presents and she wants those more than her husband! God, as a

wise and loving Father can remove the blessings, graces to drive us to Himself to find satisfaction only in Him.

**c. To develop Christian graces in us:**

**Faith** - so that we will walk, not by sight or feeling, but trust in the Lord (Isaiah 50:10).

**Humility** - we can feel we are so important, so strong and then we are shown that we are but unstable fearful dust. It should truly humble us.

**Assurance** - as we seek Him and we will follow Him even in dark times, we are being shown it is not emotion or feelings of the highs, but the work of God's grace in us that keeps us. We realise more and more that we are His children no matter how low we feel.

**Prayer** - we are not lazy in prayer in dark times, but there are agonising times spent, even spent more often, in seeking God and in Psalm 88 we note Heman did this v1b, 9b & 13; as did the psalmist in Psalms 42 & 43.

**Fear of the Lord** - not a cringing fear and terror, but an awe, a reverence intermingled with love, realising God will not be carelessly or casually dealt with. He is the King of Kings, on the throne of the universe and He is the King of love and His throne is the throne of mercy, so we go with a confident love, coupled with awe and wonder. This is especially so in the dark depths.

**d. To weaken and prevent sin:** we become all too aware in our dark depths of our sins and how they separate us and distance us from God and we will be especially tender to sin's nearness and this will make us avoid it like the plague it is - both in the dark depths and when removed from such.

**e. To discipline us:** our loving Lord can use dark depths as a means of disciplining us when we stubbornly refuse to let go of

known deliberate wrong and sin in our life. If He puts His finger on an area of our life, woe betide us if we stubbornly refuse to let it go, especially if it is a gross sin.

**f. To keep believers near Himself:** *“Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love. Take my heart, oh take and seal it. Seal it from Thy courts above!”* A middle eastern shepherd with a constantly wandering lamb or sheep, would catch it and eventually break one of its legs! Then he would carry it on his shoulders until the leg healed and the animal would never wander again - not because of fear, but because of its close and tender relationship with the shepherd. The Lord may let us go through dark depths, but He’s there, we can be sure of that, and His arms are around us and under us. He can be working so we love Him more than we ever did when we come out of the darkest depths and we will not easily wander away from Him.

**g. To enable us to teach and help others through our experiences:** Heman went through an awful experience, as did Asaph, David, Job, the psalmist in Psalms 42 & 43 and yet they were then able to comfort others through what they learned. With Job it is as we see his patience; with David as we see his restoration to joy and usefulness; the same with Asaph too. Heman teaches us there are not always easy, instant and ready deliverances from dark times.

Our all-knowing and loving God may use us and our dark depths to be an example to others of His keeping grace, for us to testify of God’s help, or for encouraging others to seriously and prayerfully engage with us in our dark time. We can be assured the experience will not be wasted unless we refuse to be taught by God in and through such. The writer to the Hebrews tells us in 12:11 *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later*

*on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been **trained by it.***” Training for an event of any kind is hard work and yet the aim is that we are benefited by it and our all wise and loving God knows what He is doing as He exercises, trains us even by times of darkest depths.

These 2 sermons on being in the darkest depths have touched on many things and I own it is a strange topic to preach on, it has encouraged and helped me as I have done so and others have said the first sermon encouraged and helped them too and I pray the 2<sup>nd</sup> one would have as well.

To be in the darkest depths is not a pleasant experience and we can fear they will never-end and we will know nothing again of God’s loving presence or the warmth and sunshine of that relationship restored. Heman seemed to have no deliverance and yet they came a day when all his sorrows and griefs were finished with - if not on earth, then certainly in heaven and there he knew fullness of joy and pleasures for evermore. As believers we might have days of darkness now or in the future, but in only a little while we will know pure joy and delight and so we are to keep going on even in our darkest of times.

In the book ‘The Hobbit’ – Bilbo fall falls into dark depths, but there he finds the gold ring – the ring that controls the other rings of races. It was a destructively precious treasure. In our dark times our loving God and Saviour allow us to find precious treasures we would never have discovered – as He says in Isaiah 45: 3 *“I will give you **the treasures of darkness**, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name.”* In our dark depths we find treasures reserved for us we would not have found otherwise. Our God is the God of surprises!

We may experience such things to a greater or lesser extent, but, as I said last time, if we are a child of God, we need to remember that not one of God's children 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. Our Lord knows how we feel and what we are going through, He sympathises perfectly with us in such dark times.

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, yet we are 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 any dark times and walk with Him in assurance and confidence, for our Saviour loves us so, He will hold us fast.