

Psalm 88

If you're a bit of a music obsessive like me, you've possibly wondered what song

you wish you could say you'd written. Of all of the songs you know, which one is

it you wish was yours? I can think of a handful of songs that I wish I'd had the creativity and talent to be able to write. Have a quick think now – what song do you think you'd be so proud to have your name on as a writer? What song is so good that you wish you'd thought of it first?

What about Christian songs? What about songs we sing together as a church? Are there any you wish you were able to put your name to? There have been some belters written in the last few decades – some that really resonate with me. Wouldn't it be something to be proud of to say "I'd written that."

Something

that helped people so much in their praise and adoration of God.

Well the Psalm we're looking at today is exactly that – someone's one shot to write a song that would help people in their praise and adoration of God. That word Psalm just means "song" or "song of praise". So this guy who wrote Psalm

88 - Heman the Ezrahite – gets one shot. He gets just one Psalm. He was a priest,

and he was one of Israel – the people of God's – chief worship leaders. We read

about him in 1 Chronicles 15 and 16 – he's a guy who's leading Israel in singing praises to God. And this is the one Psalm of praise that he leaves for the people of Israel, and unbeknownst to him all of God's people for the following 3000ish years. This is his legacy!

And this is a Psalm that leaves us with a question. If the Psalms are songs of Praise – where is the praise in this one? If this was written by someone today, this wouldn't get sung in churches.

Infact, this sort of Psalm sounds like the sort of thing a lot of people who are protest atheists could say. By protest atheists, I mean people who like the idea of a God, but who look around at the world around, and who look in at their own

hearts and the hurt they feel, and conclude that – if there is a God, he's long ago

given up on them, and they wouldn't want anything to do with him if he came knocking now anyway. Just look at the world. Who'd want to be involved with a

God like that anyway?

This isn't a Psalm you find posted on Instagram with a nice background. No – this is a bleak, miserable Psalm of despair. So how on earth can a Psalm like this

be in the Bible? If Psalms are songs of praise, what is this one doing here? Can despair be praise? Can misery be a prayer?

Well, I imagine that enough of us watching this are theologically aware enough to say that yes, of course despair can be praise. The book of Psalms is a good example of that, because nearly a third of the Psalms in in are exactly that – what the bible calls Lament. Sometimes they're an individual's lament, like our one today, and sometimes they're lament from the point of view of the whole nation like Psalm 137 – *“by the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept.”*

But Psalm 88 isn't like the other lament Psalms. Almost all of the other lament Psalms end with a positive-ish ending. So look at Psalm 13 – quite a bleak Psalm

that ends with the phrase *“But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me.”* Most of

the lament Psalms end with a renewed decision to trust God despite all the hurt and pain.

But let's listen to Psalm 88 now, and read along if you can, and see if you can hear any sort of language like that in this one:

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Did you hear any positivity? No. None. Infact, if you were listening closely, you'd

have spotted the word Dark mentioned 3 times in the Psalm. Infact, in the original Hebrew poem, the last word of the Psalm is Darkness – my closest friend

is darkness. It's the theme of this Psalm. And there is no hope is there? None. Darkness is my closest friend. What a way to finish a song of Praise.

We end in the dark here in Psalm 88 – *“darkness is my closest friend”* – giving the idea that at the end of the day, at least the oblivion of sleep will wipe my memory for a bit. My one comfort is oblivion.

You won't find this kind of prayer in any other religion. Usually songs and prayers

like this are found being sung by non-Christians. But in the Bible? Can we really pray and sing things like this to God?? Can we really rage against God quite like this? We understand songs like this in musicals like Les Misearables don't we – the words Fontaine sings in I Dreamed a Dream:

“I dreamed a dream in times gone by when hope was high and life worth living

I dreamed, that love would never die - I dreamed that God would be forgiving
But the tigers come at night with their voices soft as thunder
As they tear your hope apart, as they turn your dream to shame
I had a dream my life would be so different from this hell I'm living
So different now from what it seemed now life has killed the dream I
dreamed."

We understand how that song belongs in the musical. But does it belong in the Bible??! Can we really pray these kinds of things? He starts off well – right? V1 "LORD, you are the God who saves me". This man is definitely what we'd call a Christian. That's the most hopeful note in the whole song, but then the rest of the Psalm is just sadness followed by bleakness ending in darkness.

So can despair be praise? Can despair be worship?

Well the God of the Bible says Yes. Definitely.

Despair can be praise. Despair can be worship. Because despair can be prayed. What do you do with your despair? Infact, I don't really need to ask, because I know that most of us watching this are British. So we just bury our despair under

layer and layer of politeness and manners, have another cup of tea, stiffen our upper lips, and we just get on with it. Until we're in traffic anyway.

Especially us men. We don't show despair. We tell everyone around us "no worries" "I'm fine!" and then we kill ourselves in unparalleled numbers. Men between the ages of 20 and 34 are killing themselves in ridiculous numbers in the UK. Suicide accounts for 27% of deaths for men in that age bracket. What do

we do with our despair and our anguish?

Well the Psalms tell us what to do. And they tell us to pray it. They tell us – as honestly as we can – to vocalise those feelings to God. And that it's more than Ok to do that. Because then despair becomes praise.

If we vocalise and speak it out to others – that's called grumbling. Or if we keep

it all in and let it build up inside of us, that's called wallowing. But when we pour

it out to God, maybe with a friend or family member – that is praising him.

Because it's demonstrating faith that we believe Jesus really means it when he says "whoever comes to me I will never drive away". The question is, do we really believe that? Because if we really believed it, it would change how we behave.

So what is this Psalmist, Heman, feeling? Well he gives us 3 pictures to help us see how he's feeling,

Firstly, listen to how he describes it in V3-6

“³I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. ⁴I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength. ⁵I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. ⁶You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.”

He feels closer to being dead than being alive. Have you ever felt like that? Like you're dead already? Have you ever longed to just feel ANYTHING. Numb to the

point empty. Feel dead already.

The 19th Century preacher Charles Spurgeon understood this feeling. He was a brilliant preacher – the prince of preachers he's known as – but he experienced deep depression throughout his life. He said this about these verses:

“He felt as if he were as utterly forgotten as those whose carcasses are left to rot on the battle field. As when a soldier, mortally wounded, bleeds unheeded amid the heaps of slain...”

“How low the spirits of good and brave men will sometimes sink. Under the influence of certain disorders everything will wear a sombre aspect, and the heart will dive into the profoundest deeps of misery.”

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt closer to being dead than being alive? Heman the Ezrahite definitely did.

But he gives us another picture of how he feels, listen to v7, then v15-17

“⁷Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. ¹⁵From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair. ¹⁶Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. ¹⁷All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.”

He feels like he's drowning. Like he just can't take any more of this pain and this

sorrow and this anguish. Do you know what that feels like? Like life is coming up

to your neck and your chin and you're on tip toes trying to keep breathing?

In fact, in this Psalm, he's in deeper than that. The water's taller than him. And the waves keep coming. Have you ever felt like you're drowning?

If so – the Bible understands that. It's here in black and white. We can try and deny and hide these sorts of feelings and emotions, but the inspired word of God puts it out there in black and white for us to see. It's Ok to not feel Ok. It's more than fine to not be fine.

You may be watching this thinking “I get that people can feel like this. I understand that Dan. But I'm not allowed to feel this way. Nothing too terrible has happened to me. I have no right to feel like this.” Or perhaps, even worse,

we know people who we might say this about. “Why are they so miserable?! They haven’t been through anything? They haven’t been through what I’ve been through, and I got on with it!”

Well, Spurgeon again makes a brilliant point here. He first says “The mind can descend far lower than the body, for in it there are bottomless pits.” He says that our bodies can only take a certain amount of injury and illness. For example,

if we’re bleeding, there’s only a certain amount of blood we can lose before we’ll

die and it’ll be over. But, he says, “the soul can bleed in ten thousand ways, and

die over and over again each hour.” For the mind, there ARE bottomless pits. If you’re feeling these things and feel like you have no reason to – stop adding to your pain by thinking that way. Again, the Bible doesn’t do that to your pain. It gives words to the pain.

Now while this kind of prayer is part of the Christian life, it’s not the entirety of the Christian life. 1 in 3 Psalms are lament – not all of them. So while it’s true that if we never talk to God like this, then something isn’t quite right, it’s also true that if we only talk to God like this, then something isn’t quite right. If our only experience of the Christian life is this kind of pain and anguish, then that might be something that we need extra help in. But even then, when we feel these things, we can tell them to our father in heaven. In whatever manner we choose.

Look at v15 – *“From my youth I have suffered and been close to death”*. This is almost certainly an exaggeration of the truth, especially from what we know about Heman. But that’s how he feels. And he knows God cares about how he feels, even if we know it’s a bit over the top. So he can and does bring this feeling, this anguish, this over-the-top exaggeration to God, and doesn’t caveat or justify it whatsoever.

The third picture Heman then brings about his suffering is in v8 and 18:

“8 You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; 18 You have taken from me friend and neighbour – darkness is my closest friend.”

He feels completely abandoned. Friendless. The only friend he has is darkness. Those people that were his friends – he feels like they hate him. They’re repulsed by him.

And worse than that, v14 – God has rejected him too. He’s crying out to God – v9 and v13 – but NOTHING. Heaven is silent. Infact, he feels like God’s turned

his back on him. He feels completely abandoned, even by God.

Have you ever felt something like this? I imagine some of us watching today have. We're meant to resonate with these feelings – that's why they're in the Bible!

So what do we do with these feelings? Are we meant to just bury them deep down, put on our church face or our zoom face and just smile because that'll make everyone else feel better? Is that what we're meant to do?

Well, when every 3rd Psalm expresses this kind of pain – what should we do?

Well, Heman prays his despair. He's still faithful in the midst of suffering. Even if

it doesn't look the way we think faithfulness looks like! Look at some of the things he says to God – I think we'd be appalled if ever heard someone speaking

to God like this. He's almost sarcastic in v10-12:

*“¹⁰ Do you show your wonders to the **dead**? Do **their** spirits rise up and praise you? ¹¹ Is your love declared in **the grave**, your faithfulness in **Destruction**? ¹² Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?”*

He's basically saying to God – I THINK YOU'VE GOT THIS WRONG! You say you want to display to the world around you how amazing and magnificent you are – well I think you're doing it badly at the moment God. If I'm dead, in the grave,

destroyed, in the place of darkness or oblivion – I can't praise you. And in truth I feel like I'm almost there. WHAT ARE YOU DOING GOD?! Amen.

Have you ever felt like that? More importantly, have you ever prayed something

like this to God? Have you ever dared vocalise it in quite this way to God? See, if we learn nothing else from Psalm 88, we need to learn that it is Ok to admit that we feel like this. It is WRONG to bottle it up, and it is right to speak it out.

But do it to God. That's who Heman is addressing here isn't it? He's clearly crying

out TO God. Not the people around him. He isn't grumbling. No, he's crying it out in the faith that God can take it. This is a man close to giving up on what he believes, and instead of keeping that in or telling it to other people only – he takes it to God. He is riddled with doubts and hurts. But he knows that if we've got a complaint – we need to take it to the manager.

The theologian and author J.I. Packer passed away very recently, and his book Knowing God has been influential on Christians for decades now. And he says this: “God uses chronic pain and weakness, along with other afflictions, as his chisel for sculpting our lives. Felt weakness deepens dependence on Christ for

strength each day. The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we lean, the stronger we grow spiritually, even while our bodies waste away.” And that is so true. But it hurts. So when we feel the pain, tell God. Lean on him.

He knows how we feel already, and he can handle hearing far more of our anguish and pain than we think he can.

So this Heman, he felt closer to death than life, he felt like he was drowning in his sorrows, and he felt completely abandoned. And part of the challenge and encouragement I want to leave us with today is that this sort of prayer is right. And good. And healthy. When we hurt like this – we must pray like this. When we doubt like this – we must pray like this. Putting on a brave face or a holy church way of speaking might make us feel protected, but it hides the truth. So 3 quick things for us to take away from Psalm 88 going forward.

Firstly – if you feel like this – if you’re hurting, if you’re in anguish, if you feel so full of doubts that you’re about to give up on God and Christianity altogether – pray that. Tell God. Do not keep it in. God can handle your complaints. He isn’t like an easily offended parent sitting there waiting to say “How dare you?!?!”. He wants to hear what’s on your heart – and when you feel this and don’t tell him, he knows it already! So why hide it from him? And when it’s just you and God, don’t feel like you have to coat your complaints in politeness. Heman the Ezrahite doesn’t, and it’s in the Bible for us all to see. Pour out your heart to God, and instead of grumbling or despair alone, it becomes praise and worship to a God who knows you and loves you and cares for you. The Bible means it when it tells us to “*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*” (1 Peter 5:7) We’re allowed to lament. So take it all to God.

Secondly – if you know someone who’s feeling this – let them. Let them feel this

way. We might not think their reaction or emotion is proportional to their circumstances, but remember that for the mind, there are bottomless pits. So listen to each other hurt and mourn and despair. Our job is to help the other person turn it into worship and praise by taking them to God in prayer. Listen to

their complaints, and feel their hurt with them if you can. That’s part of our role

as the body of Christ together as a local church. Bearing one another’s burdens,

weeping when each other weep.

We need to be careful of using the phrase “at least” – and I’ve been guilty of this. At least ruins empathy. Someone could have said to Heman “well, at least

you have a good job” or something. But ‘At least’ never helps. “At least you have a husband”. At least you can GET pregnant. At least you have a job. At least... anything. It never helps. That isn’t what Heman needed, and it isn’t what we need from each other. We need to listen and to be encouraged to take all of our complaints to God.

So, we need to be able to pray this kind of prayer. And we need to listen to each other pray this kind of prayer.

But we also need to see Jesus. And it can be very easy to look at Psalm like this and think “Jesus?! Where is he in this?!”

Well he was known as a man of sorrow and familiar with grief. Seeing the pain and hurt of the world around that he loved crushed him. Jesus would have sung this Psalm in the temple.

Jesus demonstrates that God isn’t a God who sits in heaven at us in our hurt and

despair and says “Well, at least...”. No, our God is a God who can say “I know.” I

know your pain. I know what it’s like. When we’re in the pit of despair, God doesn’t just stand at the top and say “I’m really sorry you’re so stuck!”. He jumps

into the pit with us and says “I know how you feel.”

You Jesus knew what it was like to feel closer to death than life. As he hung on the cross, between earth and heaven, closer to death than life, he knows how we feel. And knew what it felt to feel like he was drowning with grief. The night before he died, as he prayed in Gethsemane, he says to his disciples “My soul is

overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death”. If that doesn’t sound like this Psalm then I don’t know what does.

And then more than just feeling abandoned, Jesus was abandoned. When he needed them most, all of the friends who claimed they’d die for him ran away. His fiercest defender is so scared to be associated with him that the questioning

of a little girl causes him to swear he never even met Jesus. But even worse than

being abandoned by his friends, on the cross Jesus cries out with more truth than Heman or even we will ever have to cry “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?”

And he did all of that so that we can be assured that when we feel like we are abandoned by God, we can know that we never will be. He was abandoned, he was crushed, he was drowned in sorrow, so that we will never fully sink under the surface.

If you're feeling this Psalm keenly today, or any day in the future, please tell someone. But tell someone who will help you bring it to God. Who'll help you bring it to the only God who knows what it's like to feel this pain, this anguish, and this despair. But who did everything necessary to make sure this pain is not the end.

Psalm 88 shows us that despair, pain, anguish and grief can all be worship. If we take them to God. So cast all of your burdens on the Lord, because he cares for you.