

Being Shaped By Lament

Psalm 88

Rev. John Pennylegion

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Good morning.

Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here. And friends, it is good to be with you, to gather together to worship the Lord. And before we come to the passage this morning before us, I do just want to express my thanks to many of you who have reached out to me, or sent messages, or greeted me this morning at the passing of my brother. Thank you for your care and your love. I do appreciate it greatly, and I would ask that you would just continue to pray, particularly for his wife, Linda, as she grieves the loss of her husband.

Well, providentially, we are in Psalm 88 this morning. And Psalm 88 is a psalm of lament. So, if you have a Bible, you can turn to Psalm 88. If you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs. We also project the passage. If you happen to be looking at your phone, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt that you're reading the Bible on your phone, because I know that's how some of us do it. But, we are in Psalm 88. And as I mentioned a number of weeks ago when we began our summer in the Psalms, that the Psalms are the hymn book of God's people. But that doesn't mean that all the songs are the same, right? Just like in our own day, there's a whole host of different kinds of music, different styles, different genres. You can listen to rap, folk, country, alternative, classic rock, right, pop. There's all sorts of different genres of music today. Well, that was the case for God's people as well.

There are a whole host of genres in the Psalms. We've already looked at Psalms of wisdom, Psalms of praise. Last week, we looked at a song of ascent. And as I already mentioned this morning, we're looking at lament. Now, if you've, if I've ever talked to you about Psalms before, then you've heard me say that there are more lament Psalms than any other genre in the entire Scripture. In fact, there are 74 Psalms that are attributed to David in the Psalm titles. So the titles in Scriptures that are part of God's Word, there are 74 Psalms attributed to David there. Now, we know David wrote more than 74 Psalms because some of the Psalms that David wrote, they're not titles to them, but the New Testament refers to them as being written by David. However, 74 of them have his name on them. Of those 74, over half of them are lament. So what that means is that as we read through the Psalms, you will have greater likelihood of encountering cries of sadness, words of fear, and expressions of doubt than you do words of praise and celebration. That's interesting, isn't it? That the Psalms are filled with this deep emotive language.

Now, as we come across these laments, we'll oftentimes see similar characteristics about them. The structure of them, themes that we come across, the laments are crying out, they're looking to God, and oftentimes they find resolution. The psalmist is rescued, or he has hope for the future, but in Psalm 88 there is no resolution. There's no explicit mention of rescue. One theologian said that Psalm 88 is the saddest Psalm in the whole Psalter. So why would God have it in the Psalter? Why would God's people sing this song? Well, before we read it, I want us to have a question in our mind.

And this actually helps us in encountering and interpreting Psalms, generally speaking, not just this one. And the thing that we want thinking about when we come to the Psalms is we want to be asking, what is this Psalm seeking to do in my life and in the life of God's people?

Or another way of putting it is, how is this Psalm forming and shaping us? So with that question in our minds, let's go ahead and read Psalm 88.

A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

O LORD, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you.
Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry!
For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.
You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves.

Selah

You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you. Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you?

Selah

Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness. (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would help us now. As we come to this sad psalm, as we hear these these difficult words, we ask that you would lead and guide us. That you would meet with us, and that you would form us into the people that you would have us to be. That you would turn our eyes towards Jesus, and we would rest in you. And so we ask that you would help the one who preaches and all those who hear. So that what is said and done here will glorify you. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

The Darkness

So maybe you were thinking about that question that I invited us to ask? How is this psalm forming us, shaping us? And maybe what you're coming to the conclusion is, well, this is making me want to be sad. That the psalm is shaping my melancholy, and I, you know, I wouldn't blame you if that was the answer you came to. As we read the verses, as we read the content, and then we hear this last phrase, my companions have become darkness, it's a fair question, right? Like, what is the Lord doing? Why is he keeping this before us? Why do we need to know this psalm, or sing these words, or to read them? Well, I think in answering that question, and addressing the psalm itself, and looking at it, it's important for us to look at the situation that the psalmist is confronted with, the context in which we're getting this psalm from. And as I was thinking about the context, and the situation the psalmist is confronted

with, I was reminded of this book by J. Todd Billings. It's a book called *Rejoicing in Lament*. It's a beautiful book. I would commend it to any of you. And Billings is an author, he's a professor, and on the very first page of this book, he introduces his reader to a fog that is surrounding him. He writes this, he says, "It's pretty heavy, isn't it? It's dark, sad. Fogginess had surrounded him." And what he's experiencing isn't foreign to us, is it? Because many of us know this kind of fog. Maybe we know it because of a diagnosis. Maybe we know it because of a ruined relationship. Maybe we experience darkness because of financial woes, or we just simply look at the world, and it's filled with lies, and deception, war, and poverty, and abuse.

But we know this fog, whatever the reason. And we know that deep down, this isn't the way it's supposed to be. That the darkness isn't supposed to overcome and overwhelm. That there's supposed to be a light that's going to break through that fog. We know it's not supposed to be like this. And so what do we do with that when we experience that darkness, that pain, that fog? Well, it'd be easy for us to ignore it. The pain, and the suffering, and to pretend like it isn't really there. It'd be easy for us to make light of it and say, well, it's really not that bad. Or, we could lament. And we could let lament shape us. Because that fog, that darkness that Billings is speaking of, that we've all experienced, the psalmist knows it as well, right?

He knows the darkness. We heard it. The deep emotive language of the psalm. Did you hear what he said? "My soul is full of troubles. My life draws near to Sheol." Sheol's the place of death. There is no strength in him. He's in the pit, the regions that are dark and deep. He is alone. His companions have departed. His eyes have grown dim. He is full of sorrow. And darkness is his friend. I mean, that is a fog. Now, we're not sure what brought this about. We don't know exactly what's causing this for the psalmist. Some laments tell us exactly why the psalmist is lamenting. So, psalms like 7, 13, and 41, it's clear that there are enemies from outside of Israel as well as enemies within Israel that are pressing in on the psalmist. And so, the psalmist laments. He cries out. There are other psalms where it's clear, like Psalm 38 or 51, Psalms of David, where David is lamenting his sin. It's his personal sin, his rebellion against God that is leading him to this crying out.

We know from some psalms why the psalmist lament, but here we're not sure. Some have speculated that maybe he's nearing death. And it's quite clear that death appears in the Psalm. The grave in Sheol. But I actually think that death here isn't meant to be literal. I think instead he's using death as an image, an expression of his experience. Look at verse 5. He uses this word, *like*: *like* one set loose among the dead, *like* the slain that lie in the grave, *like* those whom you remember no more. And so, I think what's going on with the psalmist is something that all of us can probably resonate with. He's experiencing emotion and such deep feeling that he has no words to fully express it. And we know what that's like because we all know that words are simply an approximation for what is in our hearts. And so when he's trying to describe the depth of his pain and sadness, he says it's like death. He goes to the darkest place because that is what he feels. He's using the image of death to describe the experience of darkness. That he's alone, that his friends have shunned him, that he's abandoned, that he's feeling isolated, that he is clearly despairing.

The Cry

And so what does he do with this, this darkness? What do we do? Well, the psalmist cries out. That's what we see. We see his cry in verses 1 and 2. "Oh Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you. Let my prayer come before you. Incline your ear to my

cry.” Now, here is where we would expect the psalm to make a turn, right? We would expect it to, you know, I’m crying out to you, God. And so now the light is going to pierce the darkness and his sadness is going to turn to joy and trust. But that’s not what happens, is it? Instead of his crying leading to joy, he goes deeper into the pit. We read his cries in the content, what he says, verses 9 through 12. “Every day I call upon you, O Lord. I spread out my hands to you. Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you as your steadfast love declared in the grave or your faithfulness in Abaddon?” That’s the place of perishing. Are your wonders known in the darkness or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? Verse 14. “O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?” Later, we hear this language of him saying, God, you caused this. You’ve done it. Your wrath. You’ve brought me. Instead of light piercing the darkness, it seems like it’s only getting darker, doesn’t it? The psalmist is very honest, isn’t he? And it is very raw. So what are we to make of this? Or what about the fact that this was going to be sung in worship? I mean, like that doesn’t sound like our songs, right? Or how about the fact that God left this in his holy scriptures?

So let’s return to that question again. How is this shaping us? How should this shape us? Well, I think one of the things it should shape in us is that it gives us the freedom to express our emotions to God. I think that’s one thing we need to take away. That we are to bring our honest emotion and reflection before the Lord. To say things like, “God, you’ve said you will never leave us nor forsake us. Yet, I’m feeling very forsaken right now.” “God, you have said that the gates of hell will not prevail and yet it feels like they’re advancing.” To pray, “God, you said you would lead and guide us. But we only feel lost and unsure of the way forward.” You see, this psalm gives us permission to ask why and to cry out how long and to express pain and sadness and confusion. The Old Testament theologian Christopher Wright, he put it this way. He said, “lament is the voice of faith struggling to live with unanswered questions and unexplained suffering.” And that’s what we feel.

There are times when we feel truly alone. Truly forsaken. Now, we feel that. Are we actually forsaken? Has God actually? No, we know he hasn’t and yet we experience that and this psalm is allowing us to express that experience. It is giving us the freedom to cry out to God. It is putting language to our struggle. And to bring that struggle before the Lord. And it also is giving us the freedom to give other people the freedom to do so as well. I mean, think about that. This would be sung. It was sung in the worship of God’s people. In fact, in church history, this was a psalm that was often sung on Good Friday. So God’s people have sung this throughout history. But not everyone would have been in the same emotional and psychological space as Heman, the author of our psalm.

And yet they would have sung it nonetheless and they would have sung it because in singing these words they are sharing in his pain and sadness. And so what that means is that God’s people are to be a community that gives space and freedom to lament and to cry out and to emote. And I think it can be harder for us to let other people do that than it is for us to let ourselves do it. Because it can make us feel very uncomfortable. It can make us feel very uncomfortable when people might come with this sort of language or this sort of emotion. Because we don’t like mess. And we like to clean up quickly and we like to tie a nice little bow around her and we like to say things like God’s working all things together for good. And y’all that is absolutely true. God is working all things together for good and there is pain.

God is redeeming this situation and there is brokenness. So do we allow both to be said? Are we a community where both can be proclaimed? I mean think about Jesus. Think about Jesus

when he came to Lazarus's tomb. You remember this? So Jesus, he was delayed, right? He was delayed in coming to Lazarus's tomb to his friend Lazarus who was sick. He arrives and Lazarus is dead and he's been in the ground for days. And he comes and he sees Mary and Martha, Lazarus's sisters, and they're weeping. They're grieving. They're mourning as they should be. But what do we know about Jesus? We know that Jesus is about to resurrect Lazarus. Not in the future resurrection, not in thousands of years to come, but in like two minutes. He's about to resurrect him. So Jesus comes into the town. He knows he's going to resurrect Lazarus. He sees the weeping and what doesn't he say? He doesn't say "y'all stop crying. It's okay." Watch this. That's not what he says. He knew what he was about to do. He knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. He knew that their weeping would turn to celebrating, but instead of telling them stop crying, what does he do? He wept. He entered into their sadness. He experienced their pain. And he wept.

The Hope

That is the community that God's people are to be. That the people of God, the church, were to be a people that allow others to hurt and to grieve, to cry out in pain and from the pit. And we allow people to do this not so that we can experience have this like some sort of like cathartic experience. No, no, we need more more than that. No, we need hope. That's why we cry out. We cry out as people who hope and this is where you might be going. Well, where is the hope in Psalm 88? Because it doesn't sound like there's much of it. And it's not explicit and it's hard to see, but there is hope even in this psalm. Because when Heman is in despair, where does he turn? To the Lord. Three times explicitly he turns to God, right? We hear it in verse 1. "Oh Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out." Verse 9, "every day I call upon you, O Lord." Verse 13, in contrast to those who are silent, he says, "but I, O Lord, cry to you in the morning my prayer comes before you." In his confusion and his despair, he returns to the Lord again and again and again. And he returns to the Lord because he knows who the Lord is. And who is God? Verse 1, the God of my salvation. That's who God is. That even in pain and lament, he is the God of our salvation. He is the one who has redeemed us and rescued us.

You see, this psalm is shaping our understanding of sorrow around the truth of who God is. That he is the God of our salvation. That in the pit, the pit is not the end. That the fog will one day clear. That's what we can be sure about God. It reminds me of this line in *J. Burr Crowe*. So, Wendell Berry, not a theologian, but a wonderful author. In a work of fiction called *J. Burr Crowe*, another book I would commend to you. I start to tear up in one chapter near the end every time I read it. And you should too. But *J. Burr Crowe* is this beautiful book, and Wendell Berry writes in it, "there is a light that includes our darkness. A day that shines down even on the clouds. A man of faith believes that the man in the well is not lost. He does not believe this easily or without pain, but he believes it." And y'all, Berry is right.

The man in the well, the woman in the pit, the person surrounded by darkness is not lost. And why? Because God is the God of our salvation. What's amazing is that all the things that the psalmist feels, all the emotions the psalmist is going through, abandon, weakness, darkness, forsakenness, all these things that that he's experiencing, that he thinks is happening to him. What's amazing is that Jesus actually did experience those things. I mean, did your minds run to the cross? I mean, there's a reason why this is sung on Good Friday. Because the very things that the psalmist is experiencing and feeling, Jesus knew intimately.

Jesus was abandoned and left to die by himself. His friends had abandoned him and left him. On the cross, he gave up his strength and his body was tortured. He was literally shrouded in darkness. Because on the cross, the sky went black like midnight, though it was midday. And because he bore our sin, he was forsaken by the Father and he was buried in the grave. You see, Jesus experiences all the things that the psalmist says he feels. And instead of answering the rhetorical question of the psalmist when he asks, have you forsaken? Have you left us? Have you departed from us? Where is your steadfast love? Instead of asking those rhetorical questions, God instead, through Jesus, shares our suffering. And he knows our darkness. In fact, he knows a darkness darker than anything we experience. He is the God of our salvation. He has been through darkness, more dark than what we have ever known.

And he has done it so that we would be saved. But y'all, that's not where it ends because the psalmist asks, "do you work wonders for the dead?" He asks this rhetorical question, and the answer that God gives thousands of years after that question is yes. Yes. Because Jesus went into the darkness of the grave, but three days later, he rose to new life. And the light broke through the darkness. John 1, the darkness tried to overcome it, but it cannot overcome the light. Because of his resurrection, the light of resurrection has pierced through the shadow, has pierced through the pit, has pierced into the darkness, and has brought life. Friends, because of Christ, we believe that the man in the well, that the woman in the pit, that all in sorrow, they are not lost. That in our darkness, there is no darkness too dark, that the light of Christ cannot penetrate it. And so we cry out to God. He knows your pain. He understands your sorrow. We cry out and we find hope. Because he is the God of our salvation. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you, Lord Jesus, have endured darkness and pain, suffering and even death, and yet you have conquered it all. And because you have conquered these things, we can have hope. We can have hope that as we are united to you, that we will know the light of your gospel, of your grace, and we would walk in it. And so Father, I pray that you would help us to cry out to you in our sadness, for we know sadness will come. That you will help us to turn to you in the brokenness of the world, for we know that is still broken, that we would look to you in hope, knowing that we do not despair, because you, Lord Jesus, are victorious. You have risen again. And so Father, turn our eyes to Christ. Fix them on you, our God, our Savior, our friend. We pray all this in Christ's name, and God's people said together, Amen.