



Standalone Lesson – Learning to Think and Feel in the Psalms

Text: Psalm 88

Date: August 8, 2023

Main Idea: Life in a broken world leads us to cry out to God in lament.

Lecture Tip: If your style is largely lecture style, you can use the headings and questions to make your main points for the text. Then as you teach, you could follow-up with application and apply questions sprinkled into the explanation of the text in your teaching.

Group Study Guide

*This lesson is for the Group Leader to use to teach the lesson and facilitate the discussion. It is not intended that you will use every question in this guide during your group time. You will likely only be able to cover 4-5 questions, depending on how discussion goes. This guide is longer than what you will

need but provides the freedom and flexibility to pull questions out for discussion that will best serve your group time.

Discussion-Based Tip: You may want to pull one question from each section for discussion or spend more time on a particular section than another on. It's totally up to your discretion.

Lecture Tip: If your style is largely lecture style, you can use the headings and questions to make your main points for the text. Then as you teach, you could follow-up with application and apply questions sprinkled into the explanation of the text in your teaching. The answers are provided below.

There is also additional space after each section if you print the lessons and take notes.

Introduction

Icebreaker Question: What is one thing that was hard for you this week? What did you do with the hard?

READ PSALM 88

Highlight – What stands out?

Last summer, we looked at the first eight psalms in the book of Psalms. As we looked at the psalms, we learned that there are general categories for the psalms. Though there are other categories we could point out, there are three major categories that the majority of psalms fit into.

- **Psalm of Orientation** – Telling us how life should be (psalms that exalt God and give us a big view of him and his work in the world). Some psalms of praise are in this category.

- **Psalm of Disorientation** – Telling us how life is (lament, suffering, and sorrow).
- **Psalm of Re-orientation** – Telling us what life will be like when we're delivered. Sometimes these are psalms of thanksgiving or praise after a psalm of disorientation.

These two standalone lessons will be heavy application and response largely because the psalms are heavy on emotion and application. The psalms are a response to life—in fact, many psalms are directly related to a specific event that happens in the historical books (like Psalm 51 and 2 Samuel 12). So they are meant to be applied to our lives.

1. As you read Psalm 88, what type of Psalm is this one?

A psalm of disorientation.

2. Where is God in this psalm? What are his actions? List all the ways you see him move.

God is present, but the psalmist sees him as absent. He is the one who put the psalmist where he is. He is the one who has caused his troubles and his friends to turn against him.

3. What do you learn about the human condition in this psalm? List all the ways you see humanity on display.

He is crying out to God. He is in deep distress. He feels forgotten. He feels alone. He feels like his friends have left him. He is in deep sorrow and grief. He wonders if God will ever move in his life again.

4. Write down everything you notice about the psalmist's emotions and heart. How does he feel?

Answers will vary.

Explain – What does this mean?

Many scholars say this is the darkest psalm in the entire Bible. What makes you think that can be the case? Ask your class to draw out what makes it so dark and sad.

1. In the heading, the author of this psalm is listed as Heman the Ezrahite. The superscriptions are important because they tell us details about people and the historical circumstances of the psalmist. The psalms were written during the historical books, which means they correspond to real people and real events that we have access to. What do you learn about Heman and his role from 1 Kings 4:31 and 1 Chronicles 2:6?

He is considered one of the wise men in Solomon's court. When trying to say someone is really wise, they are compared to him and others (like Ethan the Ezrahite).

2. Based on what you learned about Heman, what does this tell us about his walk with the Lord? How does that change how you read Psalm 88? What does this tell you about how God's people experience the brokenness of this world?

He is godly. He is walking with the Lord. He is part of God's people. This tells us that some of the godliest people can experience some of the darkest days. God's people walk through many dark days, but they also cry out to God in those dark days (like Heman is doing). He may feel like God has forgotten him, but he hasn't stopped praying to the only One who can do anything about his circumstances.

3. Is the psalmist displaying trust in God? How do you know this?

He is because he is crying out to God. Our temptation in suffering is to turn from God, and Heman turns to God in prayer.

4. Hyperbole is used in poetry frequently, even in the psalms. In verses 3-19, there are parts of the psalm that speak to God doing something in entirety (like healing disease or working justice), yet we live in a broken world where disease still ravages, and injustice still has a foothold. Look up Psalm 1-2 (which many consider is the introduction to the book of Psalms) and then look up Psalm 150 (which many consider is the conclusion). How do both these bookends bring comfort to the despairing Christian in Psalm 88?

God has set his plan in motion—there is a certain end that will work in our favor. My current experience is not the final story.

For Extra Class Time:

Read Psalm 89 and consider these questions as a class:

What is happening in this psalm?

What is the psalmist's biggest problem?

What words, emotions, and feelings stand out to you?

Where is God in this psalm? What is the psalmist's posture toward God?

How does knowing Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 help you to understand this psalm?

How is this psalm similar to Psalm 88? What connects them? What is different?

Apply – How does this change me?

Answers will vary here.

1. Have you ever felt like the psalmist in Psalm 88? Do you currently feel that way?

2. How does knowing the background of the author of Psalm 88 encourage or discourage you?

3. What does faith look like when you're in the position of the psalmist in Psalm 88?

Respond – What's my next step?

Answers will vary here.

1. Are there people in your life who need to know God hasn't forgotten them? Do they feel like the psalmist in Psalm 88? Send them a text or spend some time praying for them.

2. Try writing a prayer of lament to God. Use other psalms, like Psalm 22 or Psalm 42-43 to help you write.

3. Are there any songs that come to mind that help you make sense of this psalm? Any truths you can sing that speak to what this psalm speaks to? Share those lyrics with the class.

Commentary: Taken from Mark Futato Commentary on Psalm 88

P. Psalm 88

COMMENTARY

“Darkness is my closest friend.” These are the final words in this darkest of all laments. These have been my words. Psalm 88 brings to expression like no other psalm the depths of despair experienced by the believer. Unlike other laments, this psalm contains no affirmation of faith, no expression of confidence, no praise, not even a vow to praise in the future. It has been said that in the Psalms one can find words to express any and all of our dark emotions. Psalm 88 contains God-given words for believers to use while groping through in the darkest night of the soul.

The Psalmist’s Trouble. The psalmist’s trouble began in the body. Physical illness always holds the potential of bringing on the darkness of despair, especially when that illness is prolonged. The psalmist says, “I have been sick and close to death since my youth” (88:15). When days become weeks that become months that become years, a door is opened for the darkness to

enter. And the psalmist's illness was not only prolonged, it was also grave. In fact, the psalmist was virtually in the grave. Death was drawing near, and the psalmist was "like a corpse in a grave" in the eyes of the community (88:5). He loathed the prospect of literally descending into the grave, "the place of destruction" and "darkness," "the land of forgetfulness" (88:11-12). He felt "helpless and desperate" (88:15).

Trouble in the body was thus the occasion for trouble in the soul. Trouble in the soul often has three dimensions: trouble in relation to others, to God, and to ourselves (see commentary on Ps 13). Such is the case in Psalm 88. It is often difficult enough to be ill for a long time. But insult is added to injury when illness is coupled with abandonment. When we first become ill, friends are usually there to comfort and help. But for a variety of reasons, friends can fall away as time goes on. The psalmist's companions had abandoned him, and, even worse, they had begun to loathe him. The psalmist felt his friends had "left [him] among the dead" and "forgotten" about him (88:5).

But even more painful was the feeling of being rejected by an angry God. Notice the emphasis on God's actions against the psalmist: "You have thrown me into the lowest pit" (88:6), "Your anger weighs me down; with wave after wave you have engulfed me" (88:7), "You have driven my friends away by making me repulsive to them" (88:8), "O LORD, why do you reject me? Why do you turn your face from me?" (88:14), "You have taken away my companions and loved ones" (88:18). Feelings of being rejected by God can easily be generated by prolonged and grave illness (not to mention other serious trouble). The questions of 88:14—"O LORD, why do you reject me? Why do you turn your face from me?"—are questions that lie deep within the soul, questions that must come to expression as part of the healing process, questions that God in Psalm 88 grants believers the freedom to raise. And since God grants us the freedom to raise these brutally honest questions, we can grant ourselves the freedom to raise them and to allow others to raise them without fear of condemnation.

The illness itself, with the added burden of feelings of abandonment and rejection, produced within the psalmist himself feelings of despair. Words for "darkness" occur three times in this psalm. The psalmist had been thrown down "into the darkest depths" (88:6) and loathed the prospect of entering the "darkness" of death (88:12). He had searched everywhere for light. He had looked to his friends. He had looked to his God: "Each day I beg for your help, O LORD; I lift my hands to you for mercy" (88:9). But he found no light. He found only "darkness" (88:18).

The Psalmist's Recourse. Luther spoke of being in the "state in which Hope despairs, and yet Despair hopes at the same time" (quoted in Perowne 1966:1.180). Though imperceptible to the natural eye, there is a faint glimmer of hope in this psalm, evident in the fact that the psalmist has recourse to prayer. He says, "Now hear my prayer; listen to my cry" (88:2). Prayer, even

despairing prayer, is an expression of hope. Though in utter darkness, faith sees an invisible ray of hope's light. So from the darkest depths the psalmist cries, "O LORD ... I will keep on pleading day by day" (88:13). Someone once said there is no failure until one decides to quit. Lost in the darkness, faith says, "I will not quit; I will keep on pleading."

How do we as New Testament believers use this psalm with integrity? Do we let the darkness of this psalm hang like a pall, or do we let the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ—and the hope of our own—shatter the darkness? I believe there is a tendency in our own struggles and our attempts to support others in theirs, a tendency to move too quickly to hope in the life to come as a panacea for struggles in this life. Moving too quickly to hope in the life to come can mean that we never bring the darkness of our despair to expression and might actually hinder the healing process. It also can mean that we are not doing justice to the full value of this life that comes to expression in hope for salvation in this life, a hope that is regularly displayed in the book of Psalms.

Psalm 88 can be most useful in those times when "Hope despairs, and yet Despair hopes at the same time." Psalm 88 is a vehicle for expressing before the face of God and in our own hearing the pain of our bodies and the darkness of our souls. And it allows us to express a profound hope for wellness—in body and soul—in this life, even as we wait for absolute wellness in the life to come.

Psalm 88 invites us to honestly embrace the dark night of the soul, and at the same time it opens a window for a ray of hope to penetrate that darkness, so that we will not quit but will keep on pleading, until "the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings" (Mal 4:2).¹

Additional Resources:

Article: Why We Need the Psalms by Dale Ralph Davis
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/need-psalms/>

¹ Mark D. Futato, "[The Book of Psalms](#)," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 7: The Book of Psalms, The Book of Proverbs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 284–286.