

Psalm 88

Written by K B Napier
Tuesday, 18 April 2017 09:21

This Psalm is unusual. Not because it is so mournful, but because, unlike similar Psalms that call to God for relief, no relief is shown. The writer leaves us wondering what happened to incur God's wrath, and whether or not God sent relief of some kind. Each one of us could end up like this – but stopping sin is the main antidote to the misery portrayed here.

Verses 1-3

1.

(A Song or Psalm for the sons of Korah, to the chief Musician upon Mahalath Leannoth, Maschil of Heman the Ezrahite.) O LORD God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee:

2.

Let my prayer come before thee: incline thine ear unto my cry;

3.

For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.

This Psalm was dedicated to the sons of Korah again, and was to be played and sung by the chief musician "*upon Mahalath Leannoth*". It was to be sung or played by a soloist – a Levitical singer named Heman, of the family of Zerach; he was to sing the 'maschil' or song of contemplation. **'Mahalath'** has no definitely known meaning but it could refer to a particular repeatable part of the song (rather like a chorus), or it could be the title of the song. The whole song was to be sung in a particular mood of humility (Leannoth).

That this seems to be correct is found in the opening words, which immediately ascribe salvation or safety to Jehovah 'elohiym. The writer has cried night and day to God, seeking His attention. This is the position of any who are troubled and need God's favour or help.

The psalmist asks God to take heed of his pleas, and to turn His almighty gaze downwards to the earth, to see such a pitiable and sinful person as himself. "*For my soul is full of troubles*". As

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with an earlier Psalm the 'soul' here refers to the mind and heart, the emotions and thoughts. Of course, these are directly affected by the spirit of a man, which must be aligned to that of God to live in harmony and peace.

But, the Psalmist says that he feels he is about to die, such is the weight of troubles upon him. It is possible that he is literally about to die, but I tend to think it is a phrase used to describe how sad the writer is. Unlike the neurotics of our modern day, the writer calls to God not as a last resort but as the first point of contact and help. Or, as I have put it to others, 'God first, everything else last'.

Verses 4-7

1.

I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength:

2.

Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more: and they are cut off from thy hand.

3.

Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps.

4.

Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves. Selah.

Evidently, the psalmist feels wretched, as if he is about to be put into the grave ("pit": **bowr** – a dungeon, a place of woes), as we see in the previous verse; like a man who has reached the end of his life, having no strength left. He says he is "*Free among the dead*".

This means he would feel free (

chophshiy

) from his troubles and obligations if he were dead, releasing him from what goes on in his heart and head (the root verb,

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chaphash

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Though I hesitate to say it, this is the kind of talk one would hear from a person who contemplates suicide. However, the Hebrews were well aware of God's disapproval of such an action. Even so, the writer displays this kind of very low emotional despair. Even so, the very fact that he writes his thoughts down is itself cathartic, releasing what should not be kept in (poor thoughts about ones' self leads to depression, etc., which affects spiritual life and judgments).

To be dead is to put aside responsibilities and problems *"like the slain that lie in the grave"*. They toiled and were even hurt in battle, but once killed, they no longer suffered, so says the writer. It is this way of thinking that underlies those who commit suicide, but it is false, for the Lord hates suicide. Even in death, then, there can be consequences – suicide is never an answer. Nor is sinking into despair.

The writer is either talking about unbelievers who God *"rememberest no more"* and who are *"cut off from thy hand"*, or he is expressing the typical Hebrew idea about the nature of Sheol. In reality, God does not forget anyone, though dead, even if they are cut off from His help. The dead must one day face God and be judged; death does not remove a man from the judgment day.

Even so, the writer is obviously at a very low ebb: *"Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps"*.

referring to

This is again

sheol,

where the darkest deepest part of hell is reserved for the worst of sinners. This is a man who truly feels his sin and is wretched because of it. It is only this feeling that causes a man to rise up and seek God's face, and to obey. It is the ONLY way he can rise up! But, first he must experience the last dregs of the effects of his sin upon his soul. Until that moment arrives he is only partially able to recognise what his soul is truly like, and so does not fully repent.

It is a privilege when we reach such a 'rock bottom', because God only sends us to such a place because He loves us. It is His intention for us to suffer these things so that we can best acknowledge Him and His ways, and the fact that His ways are superior to our own. Thus, the reason for hitting the bottom of this pit is to cause us to rise back up in the Lord. When we are enveloped in such darkness, we can then later appreciate the dazzling light of God's presence.

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God's wrath upon His psalmist-child is indeed severe – the most severe being upon His own Son on the cross. But, a Father does not punish for the sake of it; it is always reparative and to give us spiritual glory. Until God sees we have reached the darkest hour, He will continue to knock us down again, with waves of action. These are for our strength not our weakness. We must 'hang on' until God lifts us up.

There have been times in my life when horrendous pain has been inflicted on my body during ailments or medical treatments, and just as it seems ready to disappear, another wave comes, causing me to ask myself "*When will it end?*" Yet, I know that the treatment I received, though full of pain, was not the end, and that it would give me a better life later. The same has happened at other times when the 'pain' is to do with finances or some other downfall: "*When will this torture end?*" But, it does, and what I perceived to be 'torture' of my soul was God's trial to strengthen me.

If His 'waves' of trial do not knock us off our feet, we will gain in stature and strength, and the next wave will leave us stronger than the first. We all want trials to end, but God will not end them until He sees we are ready, and His teachings have sunk into our hearts and minds. (Musical pause).

Verses 8-10

1.

Thou hast put away mine acquaintance far from me; thou hast made me an abomination unto them: I am shut up, and I cannot come forth.

2.

Mine eye mourneth by reason of affliction: LORD, I have called daily upon thee, I have stretched out my hands unto thee.

3.

Wilt thou shew wonders to the dead? shall the dead arise and praise thee? Selah.

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The psalmist is greatly suffering inwardly, for even his best friends have removed themselves from him, thinking he was vile. So much so, he feels like one locked in a dungeon (see above) with no way out and no hope: *"I cannot come forth"*. I have met many modern Christians who feel this way, as if God has forgotten them and they are locked into an ever-downward spiral. This, though, is only how they perceive their situation – it is not how God sees it. What we see as our final hour mentally, is really God acting out His love and help, in readiness for a new beginning.

We must go through the anguish before we can recognise His voice and hand. Like a man locked in prison for doing nothing wrong, his advocates may be outside the prison steadfastly working on his behalf until he is released, just as Jesus Christ works for us when we feel so low; He picks us up and carries us until we can at last understand He is doing so and all is not lost.

The writer cries out in anguish because of what afflicts him (all of this sounds very much like David). He has called upon Jehovah every day and held out his arms hoping God would hold his hand in comfort. But, the time is not yet arrived for comfort. First, the writer must experience the lowest depths of soul. No-one wants this suffering, but it is designed for every man whose spirit seeks after the Lord.

The writer cannot help himself, comparing his situation to that of a prisoner in a dungeon in the deepest parts of Sheol. The dead are dead, he says, so how can you, Lord, show a dead man wonders? The dead are unable to respond in any way, so do you, Lord, expect him to rise up and sing your praises? This is a very direct way to face God, but it is drawn from the suffering of an otherwise holy soul. (Pause).

Verses 11-13

1.

Shall thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction?

2.

Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

3.

But unto thee have I cried, O LORD; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee.

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The writer is really overcome by his experiences and continues his demands of God – can a dead man know you are showing him lovingkindness? No! Or, can the dead man realise you are being faithful towards him in the midst of his destruction (death)? The word for ‘destruction’ is **‘abaddown**, a proper locative noun. Thus, it speaks of the place the writer believes himself to be in – the lowest depths of Sheol, where Abaddon causes everything to perish. (The Greeks referred to him as Apollyon).

It is a name of an ‘angel-prince’ who rules the ‘infernial regions’, a minister of death whose name means ‘destruction’ (See revelation 9:11). It is how early Hebrews thought of hell. So – how can you, Lord, counter the destruction visited upon a man by this angel of death? The thoughts, then, are of the deepest kind, seeing no relief.

The challenge continues – shall anything miraculous you do, Lord, be known by a man in the deepest pit? In a place where everyone and everything is not even a memory, can your righteousness break through? Well, yes, God can and does! In despair a man will wallow in depressive mood, and he cannot envisage God working in and on his life. Even while he thinks he is sinking beyond rescue, God is working towards his repair. What we see in this psalm is the lowest of low ebbs, and it is good that God allows it to be shown in His word.

The writer reminds God, though He does not need reminding, that the psalmist has called out to Him in anguish. In the morning of another day of anguish and cries, *“shall my prayer prevent thee”*. That is, his prayer would be put in front of God, so that He could not ignore it. But, God does not ignore our sincere prayers of need. That He will not answer immediately is to do with His grace, mercy and timing. He will answer when the ordained time is right, and when it suits His purpose. Until then we are expected to show signs of our claimed faith, together with praise for Him.

Verses 14-18

1.

LORD, why castest thou off my soul? why hidest thou thy face from me?

2.

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I am afflicted and ready to die from my youth up: while I suffer thy terrors I am distracted.

3.

Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; thy terrors have cut me off.

4.

They came round about me daily like water; they compassed me about together.

5.

Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.

Remember when Jesus, on the cross, cried out to His Father in a similar way: *“Lord, why castest thou off my soul? Why hidest thou thy face from me?”*

Even the Son of God, as a man, suffered anguish, of a depth the psalmist cannot reach, but the psalmist had an idea of what it was like; much that we call anguish is of our own making... we look upon the danger or problem rather than on God's face.

The psalmist says he has been afflicted since he was a young boy, and now he is 'distracted' by the terrors put upon him by God. His reaction to life is to what God has visited him with, which he calls 'terrors', ***eymah***, dread/fear. What we get from this is that the psalmist has had bouts of fear from an early age. Today this might even be called neurosis. On the other hand, we do not know what he had to deal with from childhood – real terrors, or those only in the mind. Whatever the case, the writer says he is 'distracted' by the terrors put on him by God. By 'distracted' he means perplexed. To put it another way, he asks the modern question, 'Why me, O Lord?'

We cannot tell the real cause of what is happening, but the writer says he feels the *“fierce wrath”* going over him; it is so fierce he feels cut off (from God and probably from his own mind and heart). The word for 'wrath',

charown

, is always used of God's anger. This confirms that whoever this writer is, he has sinned and

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God is punishing him for it until he repents. For some reason, God is incensed, **charah**, by the man. The fact that this has been going on for most of the man's life indicates his culpability before God.

This holy anger against him means he has been subjected to the actions of his enemies, who surround him on all sides *"like water"*. He has so many troubles from people, he says everyone, whether *"lover"* or *"friend"*, has left him alone, and those he knows are far away, as if in a dark place. This could easily speak of the way neurotics lose friends and family, even spouses, because of their mournful personality and actions. Few wish to be close to someone who is always depressed, seeing the worst on every occasion.

Who, then, is this psalmist, whose life has been filled with anxiety and anguish? Whoever he is, he would not call to God unless he had an underlying faith in the Lord. Though he struggles to utter his prayer from a very dark place of soul, he nevertheless utters them, in the hope that God would end His anger against him.

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