

"The Darkest Night of My Year"
A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church
Reverend Henry T.C. Sun, Ph.D.
11 September 2022
Psalm 88
Psalm 89:38-51

Psalm 88

¹O Lord, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence,

²let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.

³For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.

⁴I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help,

⁵like those forsaken 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.

⁶You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep.

⁷Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah

⁸You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape;

⁹my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call on you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you.

¹⁰Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? Selah

¹¹Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

¹²Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

¹³But I, O Lord, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.

¹⁴O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?

¹⁵Wretched and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

¹⁶Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me.

¹⁷They surround me like a flood all day long; from all sides they close in on me.

¹⁸You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me; my companions are in darkness.

Psalm 89

³⁸But now you have spurned and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed.

³⁹You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust.

⁴⁰You have broken through all his walls; you have laid his strongholds in ruins.

⁴¹All who pass by plunder him; he has become the scorn of his neighbors.

⁴²You have exalted the right hand of his foes; you have made all his enemies rejoice.

⁴³Moreover, you have turned back the edge of his sword, and you have not supported him in battle.

⁴⁴You have removed the scepter from his hand, and hurled his throne to the ground.

⁴⁵You have cut short the days of his youth; you have covered him with shame. Selah

⁴⁶How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?

⁴⁷Remember how short my time is— for what vanity you have created all mortals!

⁴⁸Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol? Selah

⁴⁹Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?

⁵⁰Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted; how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples,

⁵¹with which your enemies taunt, O Lord, with which they taunted the footsteps of your anointed.

I. Introduction

I mentioned last week that life sometimes has its ups and that life sometimes has its downs. What is unusual about today is that in my life anyway, today is both an upper and a downer. It's an upper because four years ago, on September 9, 2018 to be exact, I stepped into this pulpit for the first time as its pastor. I preached here in June, I think, of 2018 and met with Session after the service. I can still remember Karen Stierwalt asking me the first question of the interview, to describe the experience I had as an Interim pastor, to which I honestly replied, "I have no experience as an Interim pastor. I've never been one, I've never studied interim pastorates in seminary, and so to be honest, I got nothing for you." That answer led to Karen's second question, which was, "Then why are you here in the first place?" That led to a wonderful give and take conversation that eventually led to Session inviting me to become your pastor following the unexpected departure of Yung Me. And I have to say that these last four year have been the happiest four years I've ever spent with any church in my adult life. They say that time flies when you're having fun, and that is certainly true for me. I've been blessed beyond measure these last four years and they really have flown by in the blink of an eye. I will be forever grateful to this church and to this church family for inviting me to be your pastor,

accepting me with all my faults and quibbles, and for showering me with your love. Thank you, thank you, and one more time, thank you.

(slide2) But today is at the same time a very difficult day for me, as it is for some of you as well. September 11, 2001 is the day that foreign terrorists set their sights on New York City and Washington D.C. in an attempt to kill as many people as they could. My father, God rest his soul, was visiting me and Tyler at that time, and I remember watching the planes crash into the twin towers with my dad, utterly shocked at what my eyes were seeing. September 11, 2009 is also the day that my older brother Steven lost his fight with a coma. He had been diagnosed with an 80% heart blockage, but he didn't have private health insurance, so he decided that if he could lose some weight that might make it easier for him to get insurance so that he wouldn't be on the hook for the thousands of dollars that the proposed heart procedure would have cost him. Remember, the Affordable Care Act which might have saved Steven's life wasn't signed into law until March 23, 2010, so he was really between a rock and a hard place.

In December of 2008, his doctor prescribed Coumadin for him. When Steven went back to the hospital the next week to check the dosage he was given, the doctor who prescribed Coumadin wasn't there to see him that day. So he went home, thinking that he could wait another week and that things would get straightened out at that time. Instead, he developed an excruciating headache that kept him up for 72 straight hours. When one of his church friends saw him later that week, they insisted that he go to the hospital and get checked out. Once there, Steven got some additional medicine to relieve his headache, and he collapsed. We thought at first this was due to lack of sleep, but we would later learn that he had fallen into a coma. About 10 months later, on September 11, 2009, Steven passed away, leaving me the

oldest of my remaining brothers, and after my father passed away in 2013, the oldest surviving member of my family period.

II. Pivot to the Psalms

(slide3) I relate these two moments in my own life which both happen to coincide with today's date because our two psalms this morning might be the two darkest and most difficult psalms for the modern Christian reader to read. Beth Tanner rightly notes that "Psalm 88 and 89 stand together ~~at the end of Book Three~~ as the darkest place in the whole book of Psalms. Both are prayers for help, and both end without resolution." Professor Tanner continues by reminding us that "Psalm 88 is the cry of an individual who sees her problem as God. Its images provide an unflinching view of a human who feels as if God has not only abandoned her, but that God has caused her situation in the first place. The psalm's message is shocking to modern readers who are unaccustomed to the frankness of these ancient prayers for help" (DeClaise-Walford et al, NICOT 668; see also Anderson NCBC 623 ["the Psalm creates an impression of unrelieved gloom without a ray of light"]; Weiser OTL 586 ["This psalm is a lament, unrelieved by a single ray of comfort or hope, of a man whose life has been marked by suffering since his youth"]; and, at greater length, Tate WBC 404-05).

In other words, today's sermon might end up reminding you of the dark night of your soul, too. Let's see more closely what Professor Tanner is talking about in Psalm 88 first and in Psalm 89 second.

(slide4) The distraught nature of the author of Psalm 88, one Heman the Ezahite according to the Psalm's introductory superscription (other than 1 Kgs 4:31 [= MT 5:11] and Psalm 88, this name occurs only in 1-2 Chronicles, where it occurs some 13 times. It is unclear whether the same individual is in view in these references [so, rightly, DeClaise-Walford et al, NICOT 668 ("The Heman here may be one of these two men [the wise man mentioned in 1 Kgs 4 or the musician mentioned in in 1 Chron 6:33] or another person altogether"))], is evident from the very beginning of

the Psalm. Verses 1-2 tell us that Heman is crying "out in your presence" at night, asking that his "prayer might come before [God]" and that God would "incline your ear to my cry." (Note that the translation of verse 1b [יָיִם-צִעֲקָתִי בַלַּיְלָהּ נִגְדָּה] is contested because the word יָיִם, 'day,' is awkward. The NRSV attempts to smooth out the translation by assuming that the word יָיִם carries the meaning "when," as if it were shorthand for בַּיָּיִם, as does the NJPS translation. On the other hand, the NASB translates, "I have cried out by day and in the night before you" even though there is no preposition meaning 'by' prefixed to יָיִם; the NIV and NET translate similarly.) We will see Heman's plaintive cry again in verse 9b, where he says, "Every day I call to you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you," and in verse 13, where he says, "But I, O LORD, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes to you." Those references aren't there by accident; spreading the hands in prayer to God was a common gesture amongst the children of Israel, as we see in Psalm 143:6 ("I stretch out my hands to you") and Isa 1:15 ("When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen"). The morning was the time when the Hebrews expected God to answer their cries for help, as we see in Ps 46:5 ("God will help it when the morning dawns"), 90:14 ("Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love"), and 143:8 ("Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning") (so Kraus, CC 194; see also Briggs ICC 2:245; Dahood AB 305). These three cries to God for help divide the Psalm into three different parts, as if to emphasize just how dire the Psalmist's situation really is.

(slide5) And just how dire is that situation? Well we get that in verses 3-9. Heman is apparently at the point of death; note the language here of "Sheol (שְׁאוֹל; see RISBE 4:472; ABD 2:101-04; DeClaisse-Warford et al, NICOT 440)" in verse 3, "the Pit (בְּוֹר; see RISBE 3:874; TDOT 14:242)" in verses 4 and 6 the "dead" and the "slain that lie in the grave" in verse 5. All of these are Hebrew idioms for or references to death. Why is death such a big concern for Heman? For example, with respect to Sheol, doesn't Psalm 139:8 tell us that "if I make my bed in Sheol, you are

there"? Doesn't Amos proclaim that "Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them" (Amos 9:2). Doesn't Jonah say that "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice" (Jonah 2:2)? All of that is true. The problem is that this is not the only understanding of life after death in the Hebrew Bible or even the most widely held view. The more general understanding of Sheol in the Hebrew Bible is that "being banned to Sheol creates distance from God.... Yahweh has nothing to do with the deceased and that the latter have no community with him" (TDOT 14:246; see also TLOT 1281 ["The most significant theological factor for those dwelling in *šē'ōl* is exclusion from Yahweh's cult and historical acts"] and IVP Dictionary WPW 52 ["a place of inactivity (Eccles 9:10) and where people are cut off from the Lord and cannot praise him"]). Philip Johnson, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the OT* [Downer's Grove: IVP Press, 2002] agrees, and notes that "death cut one off from Yahweh," citing Ps 6:5; 88:5; 10-12; Ps 115:17; Isa 38:18 [page 32]). That understanding of life after death is quite different from what the New Testament proclaims, and that's one of the things that can make the Hebrew Bible difficult to understand as a pre-Christian document.

So it is easy to understand the Psalmist's bitter complaint in these verses. He compares himself to those "whom you remember no more" in verse 5. He complains that "Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves" in verse 7. And though Heman is still alive, he is isolated and alone in verse 8: "You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape." How long has the Psalmist been suffering? "Wretched and close to death from my youth up (מִנְעֹר)" suggests that the Psalmist has been suffering for many years. All in all, not the kind of psalm that we are accustomed to reading. Is it any surprise that this psalm isn't included anywhere in the Lectionary? Not really, is it?

(slide6) And by the time we get to the end of the psalm, the negative emotionality gets even more intense, because Heman puts the blame for his current situation squarely on God's shoulders. Notice how many times Heman addresses directly God in the second person in these verses. "O LORD, why do **you** cast me off? Why do **you** hide your face from me?" he asks in verse 14. "**Your** wrath has swept over me; **your** dread assaults destroy me" he claims in verse 18. "**You** have caused friend and neighbor to shun me" he proclaims in verse 18. That Heman was always heading in this direction is clear from verses 6 and 7, where he says, "**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." No less than eleven separate times Heman lays the blame squarely at the feet of God for his troubles in this Psalm: "**You** have caused my companions to shun me"; "**you** have made me a thing of horror to them"; "**your** terrors"; "**your** wrath"; "**your** dread assaults."

And there, the psalm ends. There isn't any prayer of confidence that God will rescue him, deliver him, save him, extend mercy to him, or grant him grace. Heman simply cries out to God three times, describing his desperate situation three times, pleading with God to help him, but Heman receives no answer and gives us no expectation that any such answer is forthcoming.

(slide7) Things escalate even more in Psalm 89. The first part of the psalm, which we didn't read, reads like a joyous celebration of all God's promises to the children of Israel in general and to King David and his line of successors more specifically, written by someone named Ethan the Ezrahite (see 1 Kgs 4:31 [= MT 1 Kgs 5:11]; 1 Chron 2:6, 7; 6:29; 15:17, 19. As with Heman, it is unknown whether these are the same individuals or different individuals with the same name). The psalm begins on a joyous note of celebration; "I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my

mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens," we read in verses 1-2. That tone continues through the first 37 verses of the Psalm. Remember King David? "I have sworn to my servant David: I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations" (vv 3-4). "My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him ... Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand forever. I will establish his line forever, and his throne as long as the heavens endure" (vv 24, 28). Remember Genesis 1? "The heavens are yours, the earth is also yours; the world and all that is in it - you have founded them. The north and the south - you created them" (vv 11-12).

(**slide8**) But the Psalm takes a dramatically different turn starting in verse 38, which is the beginning of our second Scripture reading this morning. Now the psalmist accuses God of "spurning" and "rejecting" his chosen leader, of "renouncing" his covenant with David and "defiling" his crown in the dust. God has "removed" the scepter from his hand, "hurled" his throne to the ground, and "covered" him with shame. Notice that Psalm 89 follows in the footsteps of Psalm 88 by accusing God in the second person of doing these things. Indeed, eighteen (!) times, Ethan accuses God of acting in the exact opposite way from his covenant promise to David and by extension his covenant promise to the children of Israel in verses 38-45 (so deClaissé-Walford et al, NICOT, 682). For example, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to my servant David: 'I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations'" in verse 3 becomes "You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust" in verse 39. Similarly, "I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him" in verse 23 becomes "You have exalted

the right hand of his foes; you have made all his enemies rejoice. Moreover, you have turned back the end of his sword, and you have not supported him in battle" in verses 42-43 (for additional examples, see deClaissé-Walford et al, NICOT 682). Everything that God has promised seems to have been turned upside down and inside out. Nothing is as it should be, and everything seems to have gone wrong because God has acted in ways that violate his covenant promises to David.

Be that as it is, the psalm ends, unsurprisingly, with a question: "Lord, *where is* your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?" In other words, a very similar dynamic is at play in Psalms 88 and 89, two psalms which lament and complain about what is happening to Heman, an individual on the one hand, and to David and David's kingdom on the other. One psalm focuses on one individual about whom we know almost nothing. The other focuses on perhaps the most famous king and hero of the Old Testament itself. Having looked closely at these two psalms, Professor's Tanner's statement from the beginning of the sermon bears repeating: "Psalm 88 and 89 stand together at the end of Book Three as the darkest place in the whole book of Psalms. Both are prayers for help, and both end without resolution."

III. Pivot to today

I mentioned at the start of this morning's sermon how September 11th is always a difficult day for me, not just because of what happened in New York City but also because it's the day that my older brother died. His church friends in Southern CA and I prayed for him for months, begging God to wake him up out of his coma so that he could continue living the life God planned for him. I am sure that the loved ones of those who were in the twin towers did the same for them. So on this day, there is a great resonance in my soul with the prayer of the

psalmist, "O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?" in Psalm 88, or "How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? ... where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?" in Psalm 89.

All of which is to say just this one thing: The simplistic platitudes that we sometimes tell each other and that we sometimes share with ourselves aren't always the right things to say to someone who is suffering, or who is in great personal distress, or who is wondering where God is in their life. I was reminded, by very well meaning Christians, of verses like "All things work out for the good for those who love the Lord" from Romans 8. Of verses like "God won't give you more than you can handle" in 1 Corinthians 10. Of verses like "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice!" in Philippians 4. And in the long run, I believe that with all my heart, and all my soul, and all my strength. I am grateful for the little card that Kay Talbot passed out a few weeks ago. I put it on my computer so that I can look at it constantly, and it counsels me to "let nothing disturb me; let nothing dismay me; All things pass: God never changes." I need to be reminded of that from time to time.

But there's nothing like that in Psalm 88. There's nothing like that in Psalm 89. The Psalmists are in some kind of a horrible situation to which they see no end. For Heman in Psalm 88, the situation he was in seems to have lasted for years ("from my youth up," he writes in Psalm 88:15), leading to him being on the brink of dying. For Ethan in Psalm 89, it seems as though the Babylonian exile is in view because that was the time when God's covenant with David would have become the existential crisis that the psalm reflects (so deClausse-Walford et al NICOT

683 ["Psalm 89 is probably a psalm that was shaped by the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the officers of the nation in 587

B.C.E."]; see also Tate, WBC 417 ["the present psalm is probably either exilic or post-exilic (i.e., after 597 B.C.E., but more probably after 500 B.C.E.)"]. The chosen people were conquered. No son of David was sitting on a throne. The only people left in Judah were the poorest of the poor, the weakest of the weak, the people who could pose no threat to Babylon's rule.

(slide9) These two psalms, then, invite us to accept our stressful situations, our difficult times, with all the negative emotions that they arouse in us. To accept the reality of it all, and to accept the negativity that inevitably comes when we are disappointed, frustrated, and angry when things don't make sense and God doesn't seem to hear our prayers. Professor Tanner puts it this way: "Psalms 88 and 89 together demonstrate that both individuals and the community hang in a space where God seems to have completely disappeared and answers are not to be found. [These two psalms] speak a truth that is an important one, for it is often not voiced. It is not a lack of faith. It is indeed a bold faith that continues to question God and holds God accountable for God's promises, even in the face of unspeakable violence. It is the place where one must go when faced with a world that does not make sense" (deClaissse-Walford et al, NICOT 683). These two psalms invite us to be realistic with our doubts, our concerns, and our frustrations instead of papering them over with some kind of "la-di-dah, everything is unicorns and roses." That isn't easy for me because personally I like unicorns and roses! But everything wasn't unicorns and roses for the 10 months that Steven was in a coma. Everything wasn't unicorns and roses on 9/11/2001. And I doubt that everything is unicorns and roses even today. Not when people get divorced. Lose their jobs. End up homeless. Experience some kind of addiction problem or some kind of mental health problem. These two psalms invite us to accept

the reality of our situations, warts and all, pain and all, heartbreak and all, and to come to God with those frustrations.

Optimistic platitudes are good, and have their time and their place. Psalms 88 and 89 tell us that optimistic platitudes are not always the best way or the right way to respond to deeply stressful situations. So when we are faced with our own struggles, our own heartbreaks, our own disappointments, may we follow the lead of the psalmists, accept the reality of our situations, and bring them and our emotions to God. Because I promise you that the God who still loves us, who did save us, and who will be with us forever and ever is more than able to handle us and our complaints. Amen.