

“Heman and Ethan and the Turmoil of Waiting” // Psalms 88–89 // *When It Doesn’t Feel Like Christmas #1*¹

Announcement

Can we praise God, one more time, for what we saw him do last weekend? So far, we’ve had 2,414 family commitments turned in, representing thousands stepping out in faith—some starting to give for the first time, and many are testing God by committing to tithe. Others are committing to sacrificial giving beyond the tithe.

I know some of you didn’t make a commitment last week—maybe you weren’t here or you wanted more time to pray through it—you can still do that at summitchurch.com/commit.

I’ve also heard from a few of you who told me that you didn’t fill out a card because you honestly don’t feel like your financial house is in order enough to do something like that. Listen, it’s awesome that you’re even asking that question. And if that’s you, I want to offer something: We offer a financial coaching ministry here. There’s one-on-one resources. Or there’s a group class called “8 Money Milestones.” There’s a lot that could help you, and that could be your action step coming out of this series. And it’s an awesome one. Just go to summitchurch.com/stewardship to find out details.

¹ Sources consulted: Tim Keller, “[The Problem of Injustice \(Part 2\)](#),” sermon on Psalm 73, preached at Redeemer Presbyterian, November 28, 1993; Tim Keller, *The Songs of Jesus*; Timothy Keller, “How to Deal with Dark Times,” preached as a guest speaker at HTB church on Oct 29, 2018; Gavin Ortlund, “[A Sermon for Sufferers](#),” October 18, 2022, First Baptist Church of Ojai.

Intro

Alright ... Psalm 88, if you have your Bibles ... we start a new series today.

I drove by a friend’s house the other day; it was like two weeks before Thanksgiving, *and they already had their Christmas tree up, bows on their doors, and little twinkly lights in their windows.* And I felt righteously incensed, and I sent them a text: “**Your decorations are beautiful, but SHAME.**” That led to a vigorous back-and-forth about which was more pleasing to the Lord: pausing to take time to give thanks at Thanksgiving, or being so excited about baby Jesus that you skip right over the Pilgrims and turkeys and go straight to Christmas. Good points were made on either side, though I felt in the end that I won the debate—but I always feel that way about everything, so that doesn’t really mean anything.

How many of you put up Christmas decorations before Thanksgiving? Oh man ... Summit faithful, look around. You don’t have to be friends with these people. Pray for them.

Just kidding. But I share all that as a way of apologizing that I’m actually going to start our Christmas series a week before Thanksgiving. But it’s just because I was so excited about it. Over the next several weeks, we’re going to do a **series through the Psalms** called “When It Doesn’t Feel Like Christmas.” Christmas is a wonderful time, but it’s also a season when a lot of people struggle with unanswered questions—confusion about why life hasn’t worked out like you thought it would, or why you’re unhappy, or why you feel so exhausted. ***In a season that is supposed to celebrate what’s right in life, many of us can’t escape questions about why things feel so wrong.***

And so I want to open this series by taking you to **a pair of psalms right in the middle of the Psalter** that are some of the most confusing, and yet most encouraging, psalms in the whole book.

They are written by a couple of brothers named Heman and Ethan, who both served as worship pastors in Israel.² Grandsons, in fact, of Samuel the prophet.³

Psalm 88⁴ was written by Heman ...

¹ LORD, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. OK, enjoy that statement; that *is the last overt statement of faith in this whole psalm.* ³ I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. ⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength. ⁵ I 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.

⁶ *You* have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. ⁷ Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. ⁸ You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; ⁹ my eyes are dim with grief.

I call to you, LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you. ¹⁴ Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

¹⁵ From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair. ¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. ¹⁷ All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. ¹⁸ You have taken from me friend and neighbor— darkness is my closest friend.

And that's it. The end. That's the last verse of the Psalm. And all God's people said ... What?

² 1 Chronicles 2:6; 1 Kings 4:31

³ 2 Chronicles 25:5

⁴ From the NIV

You're like, "Wait. That's it? Isn't there a **part missing** there at the end where the psalmist says, "**But then, God**, you made everything *all* better ... and *now I am happy all the day ... If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands...*"

Isn't that what church is supposed to always be like?

How could one of the psalms that God chose to include in his holy, perfect, inerrant Word end like *that*?

I mean, imagine singing that song in church! Your worship leader stands up and says, "Hey, Summit. I've written a new song [guitar]: 'GOD, WHERE ARE YOU? WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO ME? I AM LIKE A CORPSE ROTTING IN A GRAVE and I FEEL LIKE IT'S YOU WHO DID THIS TO ME. I AM CONSUMED BY YOUR WRATH AND YOUR TERRORS. HELLO DARKNESS, MY OLD FRIEND.'"

*I'm betting this song is not going to be on repeat on anyone's Spotify list and that K-Love is NOT going to feature this as their "positive, encouraging song of the week." And yet, **God chose** to include **this psalm** in **HIS Bible**. **Why?***

*Because **sometimes, our lives feel like Psalm 88.***

We don't know all the details of what Heman is going through, all the circumstances that provoked this psalm. We know, however, that it involves:

A sense of personal betrayal: v. 18, "Friend and neighbor have deserted me ..." and **v. 8,** "I have become repulsive to my closest friends."

- Maybe I'm talking to somebody this morning who has been back-stabbed by a friend, or a coworker you thought you trusted. Or maybe one of your kids turned their back on you; you've been

called a “toxic parent,” when all you’ve tried to do is be faithful and present for them.

- Maybe it was a **spouse** who turned their back on you and betrayed you and lied about you. **Personal betrayal.**

We know that Heman is dealing with some kind of chronic pain. See vs. 15: “From my youth I have suffered.”

- I’ve heard that for those in chronic pain, it’s not just the pain that’s hard to cope with; it’s the question of if it will ever end. One person told me that if he could have a road map that gave him an idea of when it all might end, he could press through the pain—but he’s just in this wilderness of uncertainty: Is this just what life is permanently like now?

Whatever is going on, Heman says, vs. 6, “I feel like I’m in the darkest depths.”

- **Caroline Alexander’s** great book *The Endurance* recounts the doomed mission of Ernest Shackleton in his attempt to be the first human to traverse the South Pole. Winter came unexpectedly early that year, and the ocean literally froze around their boat and shattered the hull. Shackleton and his crew were stranded for nearly a year in sub-zero temperatures with hardly any food. Shackleton recorded that the worst part of the whole ordeal, however, was not the cold or the hunger, but **the darkness**. At the South Pole, the **sun goes down in mid-May** and doesn’t come back up ... until August. Darkness just covers you, he said, day in and day out.
- *Maybe that’s how you feel about your problems.* Darkness. No end in sight.

Vs. 8, “I am confined and cannot escape.” I read an article about a guy who had survived being **buried alive** in an avalanche, and he said maybe the most disorienting thing was in an avalanche you get turned around, and there is so much pressure on you from every direction,

you don’t even know which way is up or which way to try to dig yourself out.

- I know people who feel like they have problems coming at them from so many directions, they feel that way ... Everywhere they turn ... **There’s pressure, problems, discouragement!** These relationships are so damaged, these health problems so severe, and these financial pressures so overwhelming, I don’t even know where to start. *Not even sure what to pray about. “I am confined and cannot escape.”*

And then there’s the loneliness. One of the worst parts of **this kind of pain is the loneliness associated with it.** You feel like nobody really understands. People try to say nice things, but it just feels hollow.

And then there’s the unanswered prayer: vs. 9: I call to you, LORD, every day ... [13] In the morning my prayer comes before you. ¹⁴ Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

- Why aren’t you listening, God? If anything, Heman says, it feels like **“you are against me.”** It feels like YOUR wrath, YOUR terrors (vs. 16), YOUR waves (vs. 7) crashing over me. Not only are you not listening, but it’s like you yourself are against me.
- I remember **one struggle I was in** where I prayed and prayed and it legitimately felt like for everything I prayed, *God did the opposite*. And at one point, I just said in anguish to God, “Lord, I’m going to stop praying because for literally everything I pray, you seem to do the opposite.” Is this a joke?
- **C. S. Lewis** wrote that during one of the most painful times of his life, he cried out to God and felt like he got **“a door slammed in [my] face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside.** After that, silence. You may as well turn away. **The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.”** (Somehow, these gut-wrenchingly honest words never make it into anyone’s list of “*favorite C. S. Lewis quotes*” on their Instagram reel.)

Have you ever felt this way?

And then there's the Christians who are always chipper and trying to "encourage" you—and they don't mean ill, but they are always quoting Christian happy-tudes to you: *Well, God's got a plan! There's a silver lining behind that dark cloud! God's just got to do a little work on you before he blesses you. So buck up, little pilgrim!*" And you're like, "Thank you ... but please stop talking."

Vs. 15 summarizes the psalmist's feeling: "I am in despair." Despair means, "Not only am I in pain now; I have no hope of ever getting out."

And then the psalm ends. And we all sit here saying, "What in the world?" But some of you are like, "I know this feeling."

The **editor of the Psalms intends for us to read Psalm 88** right before we read Psalm 89, written by Heman's brother, Ethan. (The Psalms are divided into five sections, five "books," they call them. Psalms 88 and 89 close out Book 3, and the editor of the Psalms intended for us to read them together.) **Psalm 89 opens like this:**

Psalm 89 (ESV)

¹ "I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations ..."

⁸ You are entirely faithful, O LORD. ⁹ You rule the oceans. You subdue their storm-tossed waves. (For Jews at the time, the stormy ocean represented the great unknown. The sea was this mighty uncontrolled power. God, Ethan says, is even in control of that.)

vs. 10: You crushed the great sea monster. (Scholars say "sea monster" was a metaphor for Egypt, Israel's great enemy from across the sea. Think of the "sea monster" as whatever is the strongest, most unassailable enemy in your life. God has absolute power over that, Ethan says. You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. ¹¹

Everything in the world is yours—you created it all. ¹² You created north and south. Mount Tabor (which marked the east of Israel) and Mount Hermon (which marked the west), both praise your name. [14] Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. (See where we're going spatially, here?)

Vs. 21, the Lord says, ²¹ I will steady him with my hand ... ²² The enemy shall not outwit him; the wicked shall not humiliate him. ²³ I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. ... ²⁵ I will extend his rule over the sea, his dominion over the rivers. ²⁶ And he will call out to me, "You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation." ³⁴ No, I will not break my covenant; I will not take back a single word I said. All the promises I made to you are still in effect—to bless you and make you a blessing, to work all things for good in your life! I will not take back A. Single. Word that I said.

Here's the question: How are Psalms 88 and 89 both in the Bible—and why are they placed side by side? They seem almost contradictory.⁵

The book of Psalms is written, in part, to present you with the enigma of the Christian life. Because we all go through chapters of our lives, sometimes long ones, that feel like Psalm 88. **And the fact that Psalm 88 is in here shows you that you can be honest with God during those chapters.**

And yet, these chapters **do not invalidate** the steadfast love and faithfulness of God that we celebrate in Psalm 89.

So for those of you living in a Psalm 88: Even though it feels like dark chaos and unanswered prayer, here's what Psalm 89 assures you:

⁵ And, by the way, their placement together is not random. These are the last two Psalms in what we call "Book 3" of the Psalms. There are five books total in the 150 psalms. The editor intended these two psalms to close out part 3 of the Psalms.

1. God's steadfast love rules over everything in your life (89:8–14)

- He rules the **raging sea** (vs. 9), which I told you represents life's most chaotic elements. He rules over the **cancer cell**, the **unexpected job loss**, the **unforeseen bill**, the **random accident**.
- He literally **stands guard at the north and the south; he'll make whatever comes from Mount Tabor in the east or Mount Hermon in the west praise his name**, meaning that there is *no power coming at you from ANY DIRECTION* that he will not commandeer for his good plan for your life.
- **Nothing falls outside of his control.** And ...

(8) You are entirely faithful, O LORD... There is no part of you that is against me; no failure on your part to control all things according to your promise. You are *entirely faithful*. You will *not take back a single word of all that you have said*.

I love vs. [14]: Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

Y'all, I have held onto this verse in my pain and disappointment and unanswered prayer as much as any other. Because it means that one day when I get to heaven, I will see that God ruled everything in my life with faithfulness, love, and justice. I won't get to heaven and think, "God, well, you did me wrong here. I really deserved better than that. There was a better way to do that." I know that what will amaze me when I look backwards from eternity is not the severity of his wrath, but the depth of his mercy. And I'll say, with Heman and Ethan, *"All my life you have been faithful; all my life you have been so, so good! [SO] with every breath that I am able, I will sing of the goodness of God."*

But that leads to #...

2. God's steadfast love is not always immediately apparent (89:46)

- Even in this psalm, Psalm 89, Ethan said, ⁴⁶ O LORD, how long will this [pain] go on? Will you hide yourself forever?
- God's goodness seems to hide from us sometimes. That means sometimes you're going to look around and think, "Where is the goodness of God in this chapter of my life?"
- But just because you can't see it, that doesn't mean it's not there. It's just *hiding*.
- Have you ever noticed how the best movies create tension that doesn't resolve until the very end? You have a promising beginning, but then a long middle of struggle, capped off by a victory that required the intermediate struggle, and the characters are better off for having gone through the struggle.
 - Literally every sports movie ever made is like this: *Rocky, Creed, Remember the Titans, Hoosiers*.
 - Every Pixar movie I can think of does too—think *Cars, Onward, Finding Nemo, Up*.
 - **Even classic movies** like *Lord of the Rings, Shawshank Redemption, or Good Will Hunting* all follow this arc.
 - It's **not just that bad things happen and then good things happen**, but the good things are ... gooder ... because of the bad things the characters had to go through. The characters are **better off** for having gone through them.
- Well see, that's **how our lives work** too. And so we have to **avoid the temptation to declare that nothing makes sense** until we get to God's finale—because only then will we see God's good plan in it all and understand how we're better and stronger and more beautiful for having gone through all of it.

And that leads to #3. We can know, Ethan tells us, that ...

3. God's steadfast love shapes the glorious conclusion of his plan (Psalms 146–150)

- You notice here that I put as the reference for this point the whole book of Psalms. Let me step back for a minute and make an observation about the whole book of Psalms.
- The majority of the psalms are laments, like Psalm 88. Sure, they have little statements of faith mixed into them—most of them have more than Psalm 88—but the predominant theme of most psalms is, “*God, when will you act? HOW LONG, O LORD? When will you help me?*”
- But then, the last five psalms (Psalms 146–150) are all praise. You won't find a single word of lament; no complaints, only praise. And it comes to a crescendo in Psalm 150:
 - *“Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens!² Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness!⁴ Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!⁵ Praise him with sounding cymbals;⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the Lord.”*
- The late Eugene Peterson said the shape of the book of Psalms itself is designed to teach us a lesson, namely that *“all prayer, pursued far enough, becomes praise.”*⁶
 - The word “psalms” literally means “praises.” But the irony, Peterson says, is that in a book called “Praises,” the majority of the psalms feel like complaints, like Psalm 88: *“They are calls of help by helpless and hurting men and women. They are wrung out of desperate conditions.⁷ How can it be appropriate, then [he asks], to name these*

prayers ‘Praises’? Is that false advertising, like an attractive smile pasted on the cover of a book that contains so much pain, doubt, and trouble?”

- No, Peterson says, “It’s not false advertising. The title is accurate because it accurately describes the end, the finished product. After all these psalm-prayers complete their long travels through the unmapped back countries of pain, doubt, and trouble, with only occasional vistas of the sunlit lands along the way, they finally pull back into the station of praise.”
 - **“All prayer, pursued far enough, becomes praise.”** The journey there may take a lifetime—but you can rest assured the end will be unbroken, unqualified, unhesitating praise. *All Psalm 88s, prayed long enough, turn into Psalms 146–150.*
 - **And we will say: “You are entirely faithful.”**
- The question is whether we are patient enough, and confident enough in God, to let him take us there.
- This is hard for many of us, especially so in our day and age. The leadership guru Simon Sinek points out that most of us have lost any appreciation for delayed gratification. We live in a day of streaming TV. Instant answers from AI. You can monitor the second-by-second growth of your stocks on Robinhood.
 - **But the best things in life don’t work like that, he says. Maturity** certainly doesn’t work like that, he says. Maturity is a long process.
 - **Simon Sinek says our generation can see the top of the mountain, and we want to see the view from there, but we have no appreciation for the climb required to get to the top of that mountain.**
 - **Cultivating the unbroken praise of Psalms 146–150 takes time. It takes Psalm 88s.**

⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*. See quotes [here](#).

⁷ Hermann Gunkel, a Hebrew scholar, said that “the prayer of complaint was the backbone of the Psalter.”

4. We behold God's steadfast love for us in the rejection of his Anointed One (89:38–45)

- Psalm 89 takes a strange little turn right toward the end: ³⁸ But now you have cast off and rejected *your anointed*. You are full of wrath against *him*. ³⁹ You have renounced the covenant with *him*; you have *defiled his crown* in the dust. ⁴⁰ You have *breached all his walls* ... ⁴¹ All who pass by *plunder him*; he has become *the scorn of his neighbors*. ⁴⁵ You have *cut short* the days of his youth; you have *covered him with shame*.
- **Who is this "him" that he is talking about?** Well, the Hebrew word for "*your anointed*" (**v. 38**) is literally "Messiah."
- This is a prophecy of the coming Messiah: I mean, look at the description:
 - **Vv. 38–39: "You have cast off [and] ... rejected him ... renounced the covenant with him ... poured out your wrath on him ..."**
 - On the cross, Paul said, because *God made the Messiah, who knew no sin, to become sin for us ...*
 - Vs. 40: **You breached his walls**. Luke tells us a spear was driven through the walls of Jesus' heart so that blood and water flowed out.
 - Vs. 41: **All who pass by plundered him**. John tells us that after they'd crucified him, soldiers divided up his garments. They plundered him.
 - Vs. 45: **You have covered him with shame and ... (vs. 39) defiled his crown** ... Matthew says they spit on him and mocked him and put a crown of thorns on him and said, "Hail, King of the Jews."
- **And this, Ethan says, revealed God's steadfast love for us.** How? *Because "he was wounded for my transgressions, he was bruised for my iniquities; the punishment that brought me peace was put upon him, and by his stripes I am healed." He did all this FOR ME!*
- *"He took my sins and my sorrows, He made them His very own; He bore my burden to Calv'ry, and suffered, and died alone."*
- So I now can say, "How marvelous, how wonderful! And my song will ever be, how marvelous, how wonderful is my Savior's love for me."
- **I see God's steadfast love for me in the rejection of his anointed one.** And that means that feelings of Psalm 88, though they seem so overwhelming, are only an illusion.
 - **Martin Luther** said that Jesus' words from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" were "*the greatest words in all of Scripture*," because **in them we see that God himself faced abandonment** in our place so that we would never have to face it ourselves. Jesus prayed, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" so that I would never have to pray that.
 - **Jesus walked through the reality of Psalm 88 so that for us, it would only be an illusion.**
 - You see, it may FEEL like God has forsaken you, but that's only an illusion. **It has to be! Because, see, if Jesus didn't abandon you** in the dark hours of the cross, when your sin was literally crushing the life out of him, then surely he won't leave you now that you belong to him. If he didn't turn his back on you when they were driving the nails into his hands for your sin, he won't turn his back on you now that you are his child.
 - From the cross, in his darkest valley, he saw the mess you were in and he stayed. He stayed! And that means you can be assured of his presence now, when you are in your dark valley.
- In the cross and Resurrection, God dealt with **OUR "sea monster,"** which was the curse of death that plagues us all. At the cross, Jesus defanged that monster **by absorbing God's wrath on our sin into himself.**
 - **And see, if** he took care of the sea monster of death—I can stand assured that he's in control of smaller things like lost jobs or bad marriages or cancer cells. It wouldn't make sense for God to take care of the sea monster and not take care of the details.

- So even in the darkness and chaos of Psalm 88, we can say, “You are **entirely** faithful, O LORD” (89:8). *You’re always working for my good. There’s an empty tomb in Jerusalem that assures me he will not take back a single word of all that he has said.*
- And one day I’ll sing, without hesitation or hiccup: “All my life you have been faithful ...”
- Or I love the words of the old spiritual: “You can’t make me doubt him, ‘cause I know too much about him!” After what I’ve seen him go through for me at the cross, I know he won’t forsake me now, because “he that did not spare his own Son for us, but gave him up at the cross, how will he not also with him freely give us all things?”

Oh, but we’re not done...

5. We experience God’s steadfast love to us in his steadfast presence with us (89:15)

- The psalmist says, ^{89:15} Happy are those who ... walk in the light of your presence, O LORD. Even in the midst of the darkness of these psalms, we have the light of God’s presence.
- **Dr. Brad Hambrick**, who oversees all our pastoral counseling here, wrote a great article about the difficulty of Romans 8:28, that famous verse which says, “All things work together for good ...” The difficulty is that we often can’t see how it is all working for good. We see no method to the madness. Sometimes, we die without seeing how God was using it all for good.
- And so we ask, “Where was your goodness in the middle of all my pain?”
- Brad points out that unfortunately, **we often overlook** the verses right before and right after Romans 8:28.
- **The verse right AFTER Romans 8:28** tells us that the ultimate good God is after in our lives is growth in Christlikeness. The ultimate good, this side of heaven, is not a pain-free life, but growing in the

beauty of Christlikeness, a beauty that will stay with us for eternity. And that takes Psalm 88s.

- **And just as importantly, the verses** right before Romans 8:28, Romans 8:26–27, tell us that as we suffer, **“the Spirit”** inside of us **“searches our hearts ... making groanings on our behalf that cannot be uttered.”**
 - “Searches” means “explores.” Meaning, the Spirit explores the contours of our pain, becomes intimately acquainted with them, feels them with us, and then verbalizes them on our behalf to God with groanings we can’t articulate.
 - Listen—if you’ve received Jesus, **there’s a God inside of you** feeling your pain and praying it back to God right now in ways you can’t even understand. He feels it even more than you.
 - Ours is not a distant God who merely promises us that one day “it’s all going to work out.” Ours is a God who has united himself to us in our pain, suffering with us in it.
 - And see, WHEN I CANNOT GRASP HIS PLAN, I CLING TO HIS PRESENCE.
 - When I get to heaven, I’m going to see that during the worst, darkest chapters of my life, he was with me *the whole time*, feeling all my pain, weeping as I wept, carrying me, interceding for me with groanings and emotional yearnings that couldn’t even be captured in words.

One more:

6. Assurance of God’s steadfast love emboldens us to ask for inbreakings of God’s goodness

- In **Psalm 89**, **Ethan calls out for God to act**. He doesn’t just resolve that “one day in heaven everything is going to be better” and until then, he should just “grin and bear it.” He says, “God, how long until you act, O Lord? Help me now! Help me today!”
- **Some Christians act like it’s wrong to ask God** to release you from suffering. It’s not.

- **I know that suffering is part of God's good plan for me, but I want to see** God's goodness break into my family. Into this church.
- And so I'm going to pray for that. I'm going to be like the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 7, tugging at Jesus' arm, saying, "Don't forget MY daughter. Don't pass us by."
- I've told you often: One of the saddest verses in the New Testament to me is Matthew 13:58: "Many wonderful works Jesus did not do [in Nazareth] *because of their unbelief.*" Nazareth was where Jesus grew up. It was where some of his most affectionate relationships were. The only reason he didn't do wonderful, healing works was that there was no one there to believe. *Is that going to be true of your family? Of this church?*

Sometimes we live with Heman in Psalm 88, but we do so with the principles of hope his brother Ethan expresses in Psalm 89.

Sometimes A STORY can say more than 1,000 SERMONS. Tim Keller tells the story of a lady in his congregation who went through her own Psalm 88 ...⁸ She said:

If you had asked me what I was thankful for before September, I would have said that I am thankful for my family, my home, my job, and for God—for a husband who loves and cares for me, for four children (ages fourteen, eleven, nine, five) who are healthy and happy, for a home I never dreamed I could have, and for a career that allows me to work from home ...

⁸ Life Story: the Fairy Tale Ending, in Tim Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, loc 525. I edited lightly for flow. Parentheses mine.

But in October my Christian husband, completely out of the blue, left me and our children for someone else (who left her husband as well). This other family were friends of ours; we'd vacationed with them on three separate occasions. I thought they were our close friends.

(She goes on to talk about the bitterness of the split-up, and the unwanted fights in divorce court; the devastation to her kids.)

Now a year later, she says, my husband is still gone, still with his "new" family. He has told me that his new family will be a part of our kids' lives and that (I just need to) get used to that and not hate his new wife (my former friend who betrayed me) ...

My kids are still dealing with the impact of their dad leaving; they are depressed, angry, confused, and frustrated. My oldest has started questioning his faith; he is rebelling against all authority and lashing out at his family. My house is now up for sale—a short sale, which may turn into foreclosure. If that happens, we have no idea where we will move.

And yet, in the midst of all this—I have come to know God on a different level, to see him work in a way I had only heard about ... You see, I've never had a big tragedy in my life—never really *had* to depend on God. I mean, sure, I prayed sometimes and I saw God work—but not like this. I never had to really rely on God, to truly just

fall (into his arms) and rest on him. Formerly, when I needed God's comfort, the image in my head was me clinging to Jesus and him hugging me. But now, the image (I have when I pray) is me just completely collapsed, with him carrying me—and it is awesome. In the midst of this horrible situation, in which my whole identity and where my family has been attacked, I see glimpses of what God is doing and how our lives will be changed—and I get excited to see who I get to be at the end of all this.

[It's like being in a race, where it starts to rain and you hit a mud pit. You can't go around it; you have to go through it—and the rain and the mud are now weighing you down—and you can't go through it fast; and you gotta concentrate on each painful step . . . but at the same time, something is keeping you upright and compelling you to continue. In the distance, you see what appears to be a sheet of rain (almost like a car wash rinse) and then you see it—the sun; it is perfectly clear . . .]

And you know the person you will be there will be stronger, with more understanding of how to run this race, with satisfaction and peace.

Yes, that person is tired—but you are also energized by the experience. I can't wait to use what God has taught me; I can't wait to learn more. I have explained it to my children like this: In every fairy tale, there is always a

tragedy, and the protagonist faces that adversity, overcomes it, and thrives because of it. God is giving US our fairy tale (we're just right now in the bitter adversity part of our story. The question is . . .) ***What do you see at the end of your life?***

Maybe this Christmas, you're in the middle of a Psalm 88. I want to encourage you to lift your eyes to Psalm 89.

The Christian life is a journey of God teaching you to trust him. And we want that to be quick and easy, but it never is. Real faith is not developed in quiet, pleasant, reflective moments; it's not learned merely by listening to good preaching, as important as that is. You can learn the content of faith that way, but you'll never learn the reality of it that way. **REAL faith is developed in the crucible of trial.**

Psalms 146–150 praise is developed in the laments of Psalm 88. Listen: **All of us want to have great faith; few of us want to be in places where we have to really show it.**

But Psalm 88 is where we learn it. Psalm 88 is where God forms us in Christlikeness, and turns us into Psalms 146–150 people.

So what do you do if you're in the midst of a Psalm 88?

PRAY Psalm 88 to God

- **It's ok to pray Psalm 88. In fact, do you want to jump-start** your prayer life? Try writing some of your own psalms.
- **Do it honestly.** You won't scare God away with your anger, with your tears, with your doubts. He welcomes them. *Be bold and yell at God like Heman does.* Tell him, "I just want the pain to stop! This relationship is tearing me apart! Or, I can't bear the thought

of my child dying! God, I don't understand what you're doing or where you are." Tell him!

- **This can actually be an act of great faith**, because in writing it, you are saying, "God, somehow I think your love is deeper than all of this."

PRAY Psalm 88 to God ... PREACH Psalm 89 to yourself

Three statements from Psalm 89 that I want you to learn to make:

- **I choose not to fear; God is with me.**
- **I choose not to doubt; God is in control.**
- **I choose not to despair; God is good.**

People sometimes say, "Where is the faith in Psalm 88?" It's in the fact that the psalmist puts it in our Bibles, showing that even in our darkest hours, God is transforming the story of our lives into total praise.

So pray, honestly, Psalm 88 to God, and then preach Psalm 89 to yourself.

Learn to say, *"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for THOU art with me; your almighty rod and your staff, they comfort me, and surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever ... for I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

(And, by the way, don't rush through your Psalm 88. Sometimes you **can't experience the hope of 89** until you've sat for a while in the pain of 88. And **if you know someone** in Psalm 88 ... don't preach Psalm 89 to them too quickly either. Don't become Ethan too fast. Sit with Heman in 88.)

- Are you ready to trust all this with God?
- Hey, maybe up until now you've been resisting God, even thinking of him as the enemy! Maybe you need to submit to him. Trust him. Let him in.
- The gospel is that you are separated from God because of your sin. But God loved you enough that he came as Jesus to earth to take your sin debt for you, and he will reconcile you to him today if you will receive his Son right now, and believe on him, and become his follower. Are you ready to do that? If so, right now pray, "Lord Jesus, I'm ready to receive you as Savior. I accept your gift of salvation. Restore me to you, I'm ready to be your follower."