Mercy When Darkness Remains Study Guide

Primary Text: Psalm 88:1–18

Expository Focus: *When the darkness surrounds you, keep bringing your pain to Jesus.*

Central Truth: Faith does not require the darkness to disappear. Faith continues to seek the God of our salvation, even when deliverance is delayed.

Understanding the Context

Psalm 88 is attributed to Heman the Ezrahite and associated with the sons of Korah, a family connected to Israel's worship.

Unlike many lament psalms, Psalm 88 does not end with an explicit declaration of praise, renewed joy, or visible deliverance.

Instead, it ends with darkness.

Yet the entire psalm is a prayer addressed to God. Heman's continued praying demonstrates that his suffering has not completely silenced his faith.

He knows God as the God of his salvation, even when his experiences seem to contradict what he believes.

The Four Movements of Biblical Lament

Throughout our series, we have learned four important movements of lament:

1. Turn to God: Bring your suffering to the Lord rather than turning away from Him.
2. Complain Humbly: Honestly express your grief, confusion, and questions while acknowledging God's authority.
3. Ask Boldly: Appeal to God's mercy, character, and promises.
4. Trust Completely: Continue depending on God's faithfulness, even without immediate answers.

These movements are not always presented in a neat, predictable order. Psalm 88 especially teaches us that trust can be expressed through continued prayer rather than through an explicit declaration of confidence at the end.

I. Cries for Divine Deliverance — Psalm 88:1–2

A. Confession of God's Saving Character When Rescue Is Hidden (v. 1)

Heman begins by addressing the Lord as the God of his salvation.

Before he describes his pain, he identifies the character of the One to whom he is praying.

Hebrew Word Study

יְשׁוּעָה — Yeshuah (Salvation, deliverance)

This Hebrew word refers to salvation, rescue, or deliverance. The expression in Psalm 88:1 identifies the Lord as the God of Heman's salvation.

Heman is not claiming to understand his suffering. He is confessing what he knows about God.

Key Insight: Our understanding of God must be grounded in His revealed character, not merely in our present circumstances.

B. Continuous Crying for an Audience with God (v. 2)

Heman cries out day and night, asking God to hear his prayer.

Hebrew Word Study

צָעַק — Tsa'aq (To cry out)

This verb describes an earnest or urgent cry, often arising from distress and a desperate need for help. The related form in Psalm 88:1 emphasizes Heman's persistent appeal.

His prayers are not polished speeches. They are cries of dependence.

Jesus teaches His disciples to pray continually and not lose heart in Luke 18:1–8.

Lament Connection: Turn to God and Ask Boldly.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it significant that Heman begins by acknowledging God's saving character before describing his suffering?
2. How can suffering tempt us to interpret God's character through our circumstances?
3. What does Heman's persistence in prayer teach us about faith when answers are delayed?

II. Complaints from Deep Despair — Psalm 88:3–12

A. Description of Deathlike Conditions (vv. 3–5)

Heman describes a soul overwhelmed with troubles and a life approaching the grave.

His suffering is not isolated to one area of life. It has affected nearly everything.

He is saturated with sorrow.

Hebrew Word Study

שְׁאוֹל — Sheol (Realm of the dead)

In Old Testament usage, Sheol commonly refers to the realm of the dead or the condition of death.

Heman uses this language to communicate how close he feels to death and how thoroughly suffering has consumed his experience.

Key Insight: Biblical faith does not require us to minimize the reality of our suffering.

B. Descriptions of Divine Abandonment (vv. 6–9)

Heman describes his suffering as though God has placed him in the deepest pit and overwhelmed him with waves.

Hebrew Word Study

סֶלָה — Selah (A musical or liturgical notation)

Selah appears in verse 7 following Heman's description of God's waves overwhelming him.

Its precise meaning is uncertain, but it likely served a musical or liturgical function. It may have provided an opportunity for reflection or a transition in the performance of the psalm.

Consider the weight of Heman's words before continuing.

C. Desperate Questions in the Darkness (vv. 10–12)

Heman asks whether God's wonders, steadfast love, faithfulness, and righteousness can be declared among the dead.

Notice what his questions reveal.

Although Heman is overwhelmed by grief, he still remembers the character of God.

Hebrew Word Studies

חֶסֶד — Hesed (Steadfast love, covenant faithfulness)

Hesed describes loyal love, kindness, and faithfulness, often within the context of God's covenant relationship with His people.

אֱמוּנָה — Emunah (Faithfulness, reliability)

This word communicates firmness, steadiness, and dependability.

צְדָקָה — Tsedaqah (Righteousness)

This word refers to righteousness or what is right and just. In Psalm 88:12, Heman remembers God's righteousness even while questioning his circumstances.

These attributes do not change because Heman is suffering.

Lament Connection: Complain Humbly and Ask Boldly.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the picture of being saturated with darkness help us understand about prolonged suffering?
2. Why is it important to distinguish between what we feel about God and what Scripture reveals about God?
3. What do Heman's references to God's steadfast love, faithfulness, and righteousness teach us about bringing our questions before Him?
4. How can the church help someone whose suffering has affected every part of life?

III. Cries of Delayed Deliverance — Psalm 88:13–18

A. Divine Face Hidden and Deep Pain (vv. 13–14)

Heman continues crying out to God, even as he questions why the Lord seems distant.

Verse 13 begins with a striking contrast: "But I, O LORD, cry to you..."

Despite everything he has described, Heman returns to prayer.

Hebrew Word Study

פָּנִים — Panim (Face, presence)

In verse 14, Heman asks why God hides His face from him.

In biblical language, God's face can communicate His presence, attention, and favor.

Heman feels deprived of God's favor, but his experience does not establish that God has ceased to be faithful.

B. Drowning in Prolonged Afflictions (vv. 15–17)

Heman describes suffering that has continued from his youth.

His pain is not a brief interruption. It has become a prolonged experience.

Key Insight: The length of our suffering does not determine the faithfulness of God.

C. Deserted by Friends and Family; Darkness Is the Closest Friend (v. 18)

Psalm 88 ends with the devastating image of darkness as Heman's companion.

There is no recorded resolution.

But the entire psalm remains a prayer to the Lord.

Heman continues bringing his pain to the God of his salvation.

Lament Connection: Trust Completely.

In Psalm 88, trust is not expressed through a final celebration or an announcement that everything is better. It is seen in Heman's refusal to stop addressing God.

Trust is not the denial of suffering. It is continued dependence on the Lord amid suffering.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is Heman's continued prayer significant when his circumstances remain unchanged?
2. How does Psalm 88 challenge the belief that strong faith always produces immediate relief?

3. How can Hebrews 13:5 and Romans 8:31–39 encourage believers who feel abandoned?
4. What are practical ways we can continue seeking God when our emotions tell us He is distant?

IV. Seeing Jesus Christ in Psalm 88

Psalm 88 does not explicitly name Jesus, but its themes of suffering, abandonment, death, and salvation find their ultimate answer in Him.

At the cross, Jesus Christ entered the deepest suffering and bore the judgment our sins deserved.

He cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" — Matthew 27:46 (ESV)

Unlike Heman, Jesus was the sinless Son of God who willingly gave His life to reconcile sinners to the Father.

Through His death and resurrection, Jesus secured the salvation that suffering and death cannot destroy.

Greek Word Studies

ἔλεος — Eleos (Mercy)

Mercy describes compassion or kindness shown to those in need or distress. In the New Testament, God's mercy is displayed supremely in His saving work through Jesus Christ (Titus 3:5).

θλῖψις — Thlipsis (Affliction, tribulation, distress)

This word communicates pressure, trouble, or affliction. In Romans 8:35, Paul asks whether tribulation can separate believers from the love of Christ.

His answer is no.

ἀγάπη — Agapē (Love)

This word refers to love, and in Romans 8:39 it describes the love of God in Christ Jesus from which believers cannot be separated.

κατάκριμα — Katakrima (Condemnation)

Romans 8:1 declares that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Christ has borne the judgment our sins deserved, securing the believer's freedom from condemnation.

Christ-Centered Reflection

Heman's suffering was overwhelming, but it could not change God's character.

Our suffering may be overwhelming, but it cannot undo the finished work of Jesus Christ.

The believer's hope is not that darkness will always disappear immediately. Our hope is that Jesus has conquered sin and death, and nothing can separate His people from His love.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the cross of Jesus Christ demonstrate God's goodness even when circumstances seem to suggest otherwise?
2. Why is the finished work of Christ a more secure foundation for our hope than our emotions?
3. How does Romans 8:1 change the way believers should understand guilt, suffering, and condemnation?

V. Head, Heart, and Hands

Head — What Must I Know?

God's character does not change with my circumstances.

His goodness, holiness, righteousness, steadfast love, and faithfulness remain perfect, even when I cannot understand His purposes.

Heart — What Must I Believe?

My feelings are real, but they are not the final authority for what is true.

I can acknowledge my grief while resting in God's promises and the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Hands — How Must I Respond?

This week, practice the four movements of lament.

Turn to God: Bring your deepest burden to Him in prayer.

Complain Humbly: Honestly describe your suffering without allowing your feelings to redefine God's character.

Ask Boldly: Bring your needs before the Father, trusting His goodness and wisdom.

Trust Completely: Return to His promises and continue seeking Him, even when your circumstances remain unchanged.

Closing Challenge

Read Psalm 88 again this week.

As you read, consider how often Heman returns to God despite the darkness surrounding him.

Then read Romans 8:31–39.

Ask yourself: Am I allowing my suffering to determine what I believe about God, or am I allowing God's Word to determine what I believe in my suffering?

Remember: You may be saturated with sorrow, but through Jesus Christ, you are held by a mercy that suffering cannot exhaust.

When the darkness surrounds you, keep bringing your pain to Jesus.