

PSALM 88

This psalm is a lamentation, one of the most melancholy of all the psalms; and it does not conclude, as usually the melancholy psalms do, with the least intimation of comfort or joy, but, from first to last, it is mourning and woe. It is not upon a public account that the psalmist here complains (here is no mention of the afflictions of the church), but only upon a personal account, especially trouble of mind, and the grief impressed upon his spirits both by his outward afflictions and by the remembrance of his sins and the fear of God's wrath. It is reckoned among the penitential psalms, and it is well when our fears are thus turned into the right channel, and we take occasion from our worldly grievances to sorrow after a godly sort. In this psalm we have,

- I.** The great pressure of spirit that the psalmist was under (v. 3-6).
- II.** The wrath of God, which was the cause of that pressure (v. 7, 15-17).
- III.** The wickedness of his friends (v. 8, 18).
- IV.** The application he made to God by prayer (v. 1, 2, 9, 13).
- V.** His humble expostulations and pleadings with God (v. 10, 12, 14). Those who are in trouble of mind may sing this psalm feelingly; those that are not ought to sing it thankfully, blessing God that it is not their case.

~~ERR~~ PSALM 88:1-9

SORROWFUL COMPLAINTS

A song or psalm for the sons of Korah, to the chief musician upon Mahalath Leannoth, Maschil of Heman the Ezrahite.

It should seem, by the titles of this and the following psalm, that Heman was the penman of the one and Ethan of the other. There were two, of these names, who were sons of Zerah the son of Judah, ~~ERR~~ 1 Chronicles 2:4, 6. There were two others famed for wisdom, ~~ERR~~ 1 Kings 4:31, where,

to magnify Solomon's wisdom, he is said to be *wiser than Heman and Ethan*. Whether the Heman and Ethan who were Levites and precentors in the songs of Zion were the same we are not sure, nor which of these, nor whether any of these, were the penmen of these psalms. There was a Heman that was one of the chief singers, who is called *the king's seer, or prophet*, in the words of God (~~1~~¹ Chronicles 25:5); it is probable that this also was a seer, and yet could see no comfort for himself, an instructor and comforter of others, and yet himself putting comfort away from him. The very first words of the psalm are the only words of comfort and support in all the psalm. There is nothing about him but clouds and darkness; but, before he begins his complaint, he calls God *the God of his salvation*, which intimates both that he looked for salvation, bad as things were, and that he looked up to God for the salvation and depended upon him to be the author of it. Now here we have the psalmist,

I. A man of prayer, one that gave himself to prayer at all times, but especially now that he was in affliction; for *is any afflicted? let him pray*. It is his comfort that he had prayed; it is his complaint that, notwithstanding his prayer, he was still in affliction. He was,

1. Very earnest in prayer: "*I have cried unto thee* (v. 1), and have *stretched out my hands unto thee* (v. 9), as one that would take hold on thee, and even catch at the mercy, with a holy fear of coming short and missing of it."

2. He was very frequent and constant in prayer: *I have called upon thee daily* (v. 9), nay, *day and night*, v. 1. For thus men ought always to pray, and not to faint; God's own elect cry day and night to him, not only morning and evening, beginning every day and every night with prayer, but spending the day and night in prayer. This is indeed praying always; and then we shall speed in prayer, when we continue instant in prayer.

3. He directed his prayer to God, and from him expected and desired an answer (v. 2): "*Let my prayer come before thee*, to be accepted of thee, not before men, to be seen of them, as the Pharisees' prayers." He does not desire that men should hear them, but, "Lord, *incline thy ear unto my cry*, for to that I refer myself; give what answer to it thou pleasest."

II. He was a man of sorrows, and therefore some make him, in this psalm, a type of Christ, whose complaints on the cross, and sometimes before, were much to the same purport with this psalm. He cries out (v. 3): *My*

soul is full of troubles; so Christ said, *Now is my soul troubled*; and, in his agony, *My soul is exceedingly sorrowful even unto death*, like the psalmist's here, for he says, *My life draws nigh unto the grave*. Heman was a very wise man, and a very good man, a man of God, and a singer too, and one may therefore suppose him to have been a man of a cheerful spirit, and yet now a man of sorrowful spirit, troubled in mind, and upon the brink of despair. Inward trouble is the sorest trouble, and that which, sometimes, the best of God's saints and servants have been severely exercised with. *The spirit of man*, of the greatest of men, will not always sustain his infirmity, but will droop and sink under it; *who then can bear a wounded spirit?*

III. He looked upon himself as a dying man, whose heart was ready to break with sorrow (v. 5): "*Free among the dead* (one of that ghastly corporation), *like the slain that lie in the grave*, whose rotting and perishing nobody takes notice of or is concerned for, nay, whom thou rememberest no more, to protect or provide for the dead bodies, but they become an easy prey to corruption and the worms; they are *cut off from thy hand*, which used to be employed in supporting them and reaching out to them; but, now there is no more occasion for this, they are cut off from it and cut off by it" (*for God will not stretch out his hand to the grave*, ~~Job~~ Job 30:24); "*thou hast laid me in the lowest pit*, as low as possible, my condition low, my spirits low, *in darkness, in the deep* (v. 6), sinking, and seeing no way open of escape, brought to the last extremity, and ready to give up all for gone." Thus greatly may good men be afflicted, such dismal apprehensions may they have concerning their afflictions, and such dark conclusions may they sometimes be ready to make concerning the issue of them, through the power of melancholy and the weakness of faith.

IV. He complained most of God's displeasure against him, which infused the wormwood and the gall into the affliction and the misery (v. 7): *Thy wrath lies hard upon me*. Could he have discerned the favour and love of God in his affliction, it would have lain light upon him; but it lay hard, very hard, upon him, so that he was ready to sink and faint under it. The impressions of this wrath upon his spirits were God's *waves* with which he afflicted him, which rolled upon him, one on the neck of another, so that he scarcely recovered from one dark thought before he was oppressed with another; these waves beat against him with noise and fury; not some, but all, of God's waves were made use of in afflicting him and bearing him

down. Even the children of God's love may sometimes apprehend themselves children of wrath, and no outward trouble can lie so hard upon them as that apprehension.

V. It added to his affliction that his friends deserted him and made themselves strange to him. When we are in trouble it is some comfort to have those about us that love us, and sympathize with us; but this good man had none such, which gives him occasion, not to accuse them, or charge them with treachery, ingratitude, and inhumanity, but to complain to God, with an eye to his hand in this part of the affliction (v. 8): *Thou hast put away my acquaintance far from me.* Providence had removed them, or rendered them incapable of being serviceable to him, or alienated their affections from him; for every creature is that to us (and no more) that God makes it to be. If our old acquaintance be shy of us, and those we expect kindness from prove unkind, we must bear that with the same patient submission to the divine will that we do other afflictions, ~~1893~~ Job 19:13. Nay, his friends were not only strange to him, but even hated him, because he was poor and in distress: "*Thou hast made me an abomination to them; they are not only shy of me, but sick of me, and I am looked upon by them, not only with contempt, but with abhorrence.*" Let none think it strange concerning such a trial as this, when Heman, who was so famed for wisdom, was yet, when the world frowned upon him, neglected, as a vessel in which is no pleasure.

VI. He looked upon his case as helpless and deplorable: "*I am shut up, and I cannot come forth,* a close prisoner, under the arrests of divine wrath, and no way open of escape." He therefore lies down and sinks under his troubles, because he sees not any probability of getting out of them. For thus he bemoans himself (v. 9): *My eye mourneth by reason of affliction.* Sometimes giving vent to grief by weeping gives some ease to a troubled spirit. Yet weeping must not hinder praying; we must sow in tears: *My eye mourns, but I cry unto thee daily.* Let prayers and tears go together, and they shall be accepted together. *I have heard thy prayers, I have seen thy tears.*

PSALM 88:10-18

PLEADING WITH GOD

In these verses,

I. The psalmist expostulates with God concerning the present deplorable condition he was in (v. 10-12): “*Wilt thou do a miraculous work to the dead, and raise them to life again? Shall those that are dead and buried rise up to praise thee?*” No; they leave it to their children to rise up in their room to praise God; none expects that they should do it; and wherefore should they rise, wherefore should they live, but to praise God? The life we are born to at first, and the life we hope to rise to at last, must thus be spent. But *shall thy lovingkindness to thy people be declared in the grave, either by those or to those that lie buried there? And thy faithfulness to thy promise, shall that be told in destruction? shall thy wonders be wrought in the dark, or known there, and thy righteousness in the grave, which is the land of forgetfulness, where men remember nothing, nor are themselves remembered? Departed souls may indeed know God's wonders and declare his faithfulness, justice, and lovingkindness; but deceased bodies cannot; they can neither receive God's favours in comfort nor return them in praise.*” Now we will not suppose these expostulations to be the language of despair, as if he thought God could not help him or would not, much less do they imply any disbelief of the resurrection of the dead at the last day; but he thus pleads with God for speedy relief: “Lord, thou art good, thou art faithful, thou art righteous; these attributes of thine will be made known in my deliverance, but, if it be not hastened, it will come too late; for I shall be dead and past relief, dead and not capable of receiving any comfort, very shortly.” Job often pleaded thus, ~~xxxv~~ Job 7:8; 10:21.

II. He resolves to continue instant in prayer, and the more so because the deliverance was deferred (v. 13): “*Unto thee have I cried many a time, and found comfort in so doing, and therefore I will continue to do so; in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee.*” Note, Though our prayers be not answered immediately, yet we must not therefore give over praying, because *the vision is for an appointed time, and at the end it shall speak and not lie.* God delays the answer in order that he may try our patience and perseverance in prayer. He resolves to seek God early, in the morning, when his spirits were lively, and before the business of the day began to

crowd in — in the morning, after he had been tossed with cares, and sorrowful thoughts in the silence and solitude of the night; but how could he say, *My prayer shall prevent thee?* Not as if he could wake sooner to pray than God to hear and answer; for he neither slumbers nor sleeps; but it intimates that he would be up earlier than ordinary to pray, would *prevent* (that is, go before) his usual hour of prayer. The greater our afflictions are the more solicitous and serious we should be in prayer. “My prayer shall present itself before thee, and be betimes with thee, and shall not stay for the encouragement of the beginning of mercy, but reach towards it with faith and expectation even before the day dawns.” God often prevents our prayers and expectations with his mercies; let us prevent his mercies with our prayers and expectations.

III. He sets down what he will say to God in prayer.

1. He will humbly reason with God concerning the abject afflicted condition he was now in (v. 14): “*Lord, why castest thou off my soul?* What is it that provokes thee to treat me as one abandoned? *Show me wherefore thou contendest with me.*” He speaks it with wonder that God should cast off an old servant, should cast off one that was resolved not to cast him off: “No wonder men cast me off; but, Lord, why dost thou, whose gifts and callings are without repentance? *Why hidest thou thy face,* as one angry at me, that either hast no favour for me or wilt not let me know that thou hast?” Nothing grieves a child of God so much as God's hiding his face from him, nor is there any thing he so much dreads as God's casting off his soul. If the sun be clouded, that darkens the earth; but if the sun should abandon the earth, and quite cast it off, what a dungeon would it be!

2. He will humbly repeat the same complaints he had before made, until God have mercy on him. Two things he represents to God as his grievances: —

(1.) That God was a terror to him: *I suffer thy terrors*, v. 15. He had continual frightful apprehensions of the wrath of God against him for his sins and the consequences of that wrath. It terrified him to think of God, of falling into his hands and appearing before him to receive his doom from him. He perspired and trembled at the apprehension of God's displeasure against him, and the terror of his majesty. Note, Even those that are designed for God's favours may yet, for a time, suffer his terrors. The spirit

of adoption is first a spirit of bondage to fear. Poor Job complained of the terrors of *God setting themselves in array against him*, ~~xxx~~ Job 6:4. The psalmist here explains himself, and tells us what he means by God's terrors, even his *fierce wrath*. Let us see what dreadful impressions those terrors made upon him, and how deeply they wounded him.

[1.] They had almost taken away his life: “*I am so afflicted with them that I am ready to die, and*” (as the word is) “*to give up the ghost. Thy terrors have cut me off,*” v. 16. What is hell, that eternal excision, by which damned sinners are for ever cut off from God and all happiness, but God's terrors fastening and preying upon their guilty consciences?

[2.] They had almost taken away the use of his reason: *When I suffer thy terrors I am distracted*. This sad effect the terrors of the Lord have had upon many, and upon some good men, who have thereby been put quite out of the possession of their own souls, a most piteous case, and which ought to be looked upon with great compassion.

[3.] This had continued long: *From my youth up I suffer thy terrors*. He had been from his childhood afflicted with melancholy, and trained up in sorrow under the discipline of that school. If we begin our days with trouble, and the days of our mourning have been prolonged a great while, let us not think it strange, but let tribulation work patience. It is observable the Heman, who became eminently wise and good, was *afflicted and ready to die*, and suffered God's terrors, *from his youth up*. Thus many have found it was good for them to bear the yoke in their youth, that sorrow has been much better for them than laughter would have been, and that being much afflicted, and often ready to die, when they were young, they have, by the grace of God, got such an habitual seriousness and weanedness from the world as have been of great use to them all their days. Sometimes those whom God designs for eminent services are prepared for them by exercises of this kind.

[4.] His affliction was now extreme, and worse than ever. God's terrors now came round about him, so that from all sides he was assaulted with variety of troubles, and he had no comfortable gale from any point of the compass. They broke in upon him together like an inundation of water; and this daily, and all the day; so that he had no rest, no respite, not the lest breathing-time, no lucid intervals, nor any gleam of hope. Such was the calamitous state of a very wise and good man; he was so surrounded

with terrors that he could find no place of shelter, nor lie any where under the wind.

(2.) That no friend he had in the world was a comfort to him (v. 18): *Lover and friend hast thou put far from me*; some are dead, others at a distance, and perhaps many unkind. Next to the comforts of religion are those of friendship and society; therefore to be friendless is (as to this life) almost to be comfortless; and to those who have had friends, but have lost them, the calamity is the more grievous. With this the psalmist here closes his complaint, as if this were that which completed his woe and gave the finishing stroke to the melancholy piece. If our friends are put far from us by scattering providences, nay, if by death our acquaintance are removed into darkness, we have reason to look upon it as a sore affliction, but must acknowledge and submit to the hand of God in it.