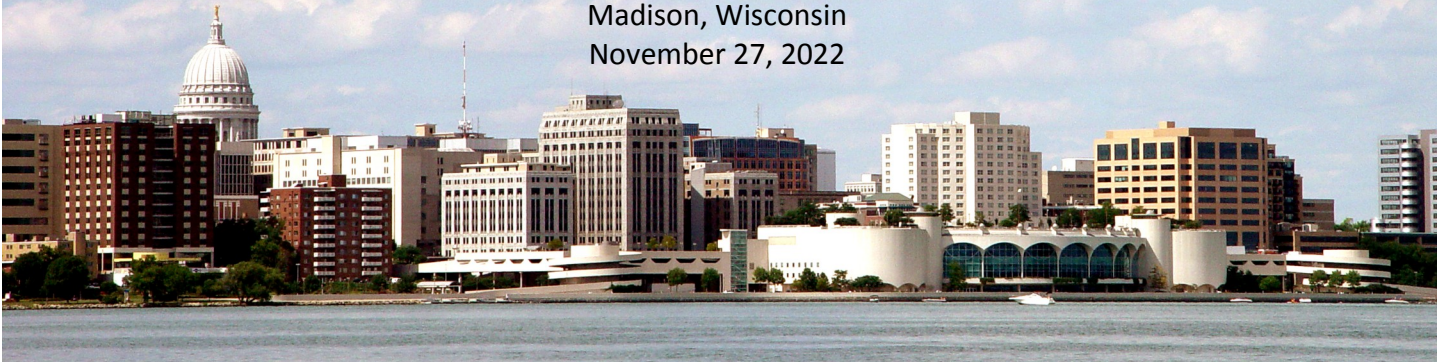


Hello Darkness My Old Friend

Psalm 88 – Part 1

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It is good to be together today! We are glad that you are here, and if you are visiting with us today (either in person or online), we would invite you to fill out an online visitor card by using the QR code on the bulletin or by simply going to www.fourlakescoc.org/visitor.

One of the great blessings in my life is having the opportunity to share the good news every Lord's Day morning! And the good news is that God came to this earth in the flesh. He died on the cross, he was buried, but he was raised up on the third day. We respond to this news in faith, expressed in our obedience to the gospel; that is, we imitate the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus in the act of baptism. We turn from sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as being the Son of God, and then we obey his command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins.

And we do have several examples this morning. The first one comes to us from Edward Borfay, who preaches for the Lord's church in Monrovia, Liberia. He posted several times this week, but the first one is of Marilyn, who came out of the "Latter Day Saints" (the Mormons). Brother Borfay says, "One more soul obeyed the gospel of Christ. Marilyn puts on Christ [after] studying God's word." And I love that we have a picture of some open Bibles here. Study is a critical part of obeying the gospel.

This next one comes from Adoleme Isaac, who preaches in Uganda. He says,

Great news today in Mbale Eastern Uganda one of the pastors from Presbyterian church has today put on Christ after a long time sharing with him the word of God and he had attended his invitations to Namatala church of Christ for our Saturday Bible class study program and today he was able to give his life to Christ through water baptism for the remission of his sins and let's pray for brother Okou Charles for the great decision he has made today and after his baptism we had to proceed for our Saturday program for bible study and all was great with him and as the angels of the Lord rejoice we too should rejoice for the soul that the Lord Jesus has added to His only One Church and I baptized him at Wash and Wills Hotel and please let's welcome him to the kingdom of God with gladness.

Awesome news out of Uganda this week, as a denominational pastor has discovered the simplicity of the gospel!

And finally, I wanted to share this one from Emily Blasingim, who was baptized this week by my friend Kirt Hughtt. We met Kirt on a family vacation as we passed through Colorado more than ten years ago. He preached for the church in Windsor, Colorado (near Fort Collins) for 22 years (as long as we've been here in Madison), but this year he moved to Tennessee. I don't know the whole story, but Emily posted this week and she says, "On my lunch break I decided to wash my sins awaybest lunch day ever!" Amen to that! And we share these examples today simply to try to illustrate what it means to obey the gospel. We invite you to examine the scriptures on the wall up here, and if you would like to study in person, please get in touch.

Now, I realize we are here to think about the good news; however, this morning (and continuing into next week), I would actually invite you to think with me about one of the darkest and most depressing passages anywhere in Scripture. The passage is Psalm 88 (which is found on page 941 in our pew Bibles). As we make our way to Psalm 88, I should mention that the picture on the wall up here was taken at my campsite at the Heart o' the Hills campground in Olympic National Park, back in mid-September. I realize you probably can't see it as well through the projector – it's better on the monitor in the back, and it's probably better on YouTube for those of you joining us online – but at this campsite surrounded by these huge trees, I looked up one night only to be nearly overwhelmed by the darkness. We don't have darkness here in Madison, do we? But when we get out away from the city lights, there are times when we can almost feel it. That night, I laid my phone on the picnic table, and just looked up and around with my headlamp (that's why we can just barely see a few of the trees here). But, we will be using this image as a background for our study of Psalm 88.

And it is a dark Psalm! It's one of nearly 70 Psalms that are known as "laments." So yes, it is very sad, but Psalm 88 is unique even among the laments, in that it has no resolution whatsoever. In other sad Psalms, the author will almost always complain to God, but then have a change of heart, and we end with something positive – there will be a sad cry to God, and then at the end we will have, "Dear God, thank you for helping me through this!" But here, nothing! No resolution at all; no praise at the end. In fact, this Psalm ends with a groan. We have the word "**darkness**" three times in this chapter, and in Hebrew, the last word of this Psalm is "**darkness.**" It is a figure of speech, but several translations end with the complaint that "**darkness is my closest friend,**" and that's where we get the title for today's lesson.

Out in the entryway last Sunday, by the way, a few of us were talking about our least-favorite church songs. I will not out anybody; everything I'm about to say is anonymous. I really hope it's okay to have some least-favorite songs, because I have a few. Maybe you do as well. I can't stand "Jesus is Coming Soon." It's pretty much one big misinterpretation of the first half of Matthew 24, which is about the destruction of Jerusalem, not the Second Coming of Jesus. So, that song probably tops my least-favorite list. Musically, I'm not a fan of "I Surrender All." The message is good; I just don't like the way it sounds. It sounds whiny to me. And I hope you don't get mad at me for this, but I don't really like "It Is Well With My Soul." It's not terrible; it's just not a favorite. But last week, one of our sisters said that she is not a fan of "Blue Skies and Rainbows." It's too happy, she said. And thinking about it this week, I think I get it. Life is not always "blue skies and rainbows." Life is not always puppies and unicorns. Well, Psalm 88 is the complete opposite of "Blue Skies and Rainbows." It is dark, it is miserable, and it is depressing – all the way to the end. So, if anybody needs a sad song, this is it! This one is miserable. One author, in fact, says that Psalm 88 makes the book of Job look like a lollipop factory. Some have even wondered: Why would God include a Psalm like this in Scripture? Why focus on this soul-crushing misery and sadness? And the answer is: Sometimes our lives are dark and depressing. Sometimes life is terrible.

This morning, then, let's start looking at all 18 verses of Psalm 88. And as we jump into this, I would note that we have the word "**SELAH**" after verses 7 and 10. "**SELAH**" is something of a musical notation, most likely

indicating a crescendo followed by a brief pause. So, instead of reading that word in the text, let's just do what it tells us to do. The way I see it, if we read "**SELAH**" in the text, it would be a bit like looking in one of our songbooks and singing the words "sing loudly" instead of actually singing the words loudly. So, when we get to "**SELAH**," in today's Psalm, we will just pause for a moment, instead of saying the word. One author suggested that each "**SELAH**" in Psalm 88 is an invitation to end the silence, but none comes, so the Psalm continues alone, giving God a chance to answer, but he never answers.

Let's look at Psalm 88,

- ¹ *O Lord, the God of my salvation,
I have cried out by day and in the night before You.*
- ² *Let my prayer come before You;
Incline Your ear to my cry!*
- ³ *For my soul has had enough troubles,
And my life has drawn near to Sheol.*
- ⁴ *I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit;
I have become like a man without strength,*
- ⁵ *Forsaken among the dead,
Like the slain who lie in the grave,
Whom You remember no more,
And they are cut off from Your hand.*
- ⁶ *You have put me in the lowest pit,
In dark places, in the depths.*
- ⁷ *Your wrath has rested upon me,
And You have afflicted me with all Your waves. **Selah.***
- ⁸ *You have removed my acquaintances far from me;
You have made me an object of loathing to them;
I am shut up and cannot go out.*
- ⁹ *My eye has wasted away because of affliction;
I have called upon You every day, O Lord;
I have spread out my hands to You.*
- ¹⁰ *Will You perform wonders for the dead?
Will the departed spirits rise and praise You? **Selah.***
- ¹¹ *Will Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave,
Your faithfulness in Abaddon?*
- ¹² *Will Your wonders be made known in the darkness?
And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?*
- ¹³ *But I, O Lord, have cried out to You for help,
And in the morning my prayer comes before You.*
- ¹⁴ *O Lord, why do You reject my soul?
Why do You hide Your face from me?*
- ¹⁵ *I was afflicted and about to die from my youth on;
I suffer Your terrors; I am overcome.*
- ¹⁶ *Your burning anger has passed over me;
Your terrors have destroyed me.*

- ¹⁷ *They have surrounded me like water all day long;
They have encompassed me altogether.*
- ¹⁸ *You have removed lover and friend far from me;
My acquaintances are in darkness.*

We don't have time to go through this Psalm line by line, but I'd like to have us think about three big ideas revealed to us in this song. And we'll just look at the first one this morning, followed by two more big ideas next week, if the Lord wills.

I. **But the first thing I hope we notice in this passage is that EVEN FOR GOD'S PEOPLE, THE DARKNESS CAN BE INCREDIBLY REAL AND LONELY AND CAN LAST FOR A VERY LONG TIME.**

The darkness is real! We look at this Psalm, and we realize that the author is overwhelmed. He's praying, but God doesn't seem to be listening. His soul is troubled. He has no strength. It almost seems like he either feels like a dead man or he thinks he may be better off dead. He is forgotten and alone. He's in a pit, in a dark place. He's overwhelmed with sorrow and weeping. There seems to be a physical component to this – he is afflicted, feeling as if God is punishing him for something. And this man says that he has been this way from his youth. He's always been this way, and he sees no hope of this darkness ever lifting. The darkness is real.

And I hope we notice who this is. We skipped this at the beginning, but the inscription on this Psalm indicates that it is written by Heman the Ezrahite, a descendant of Korah. We remember Korah from Numbers. He's the man who led a rebellion against Moses. God causes Korah and his family to be swallowed by the earth. There were several survivors, including (ultimately) Heman. From several passages in Chronicles, we know that Heman was appointed by King David to lead the nation in worship. He was both a singer and a musician. Some have suggested that musicians and artists have higher rates of depression. I'm not sure whether that's true, but I think we do see it here, don't we? In 1 Kings 4:31, we're told that Solomon was "*wiser than Heman.*" In other words, Heman was incredibly wise, and when people tried to explain the wisdom of Solomon they had to compare Solomon to Heman. We also know that Heman was the father of 17 children. Maybe that was his problem!

But, I hope we put all of this together: The darkness is real, and it's real for a man of God, a leader in worship, a husband and father, a family man, a man of great wisdom. You can be a spiritual person and experience the deepest of darkness. And not only that, but God puts this in the Bible! This is inspired. This is the word of God. God wants us to know this. There may be times when all of us go through a time of darkness. It may be situational – struggling with the death of a loved one, suffering through an illness of our own, experiencing the betrayal of a friend or maybe a divorce, the darkness may be tied to a financial disaster of some kind, we may be overwhelmed when a child wanders away from God – or, the darkness may just hover over us for life, for reasons we may never understand. But the first big idea I hope we understand from Psalm 88 is that the darkness is real, it happens to the best of us, and it may hang around for a long time.

And I know this may be a dark thought, but don't we also find some encouragement in this? Imagine, on the other hand, that the Bible only told us about positive things happening to God's people. If the Bible truly only told us about blue skies and rainbows, I would suggest that when the dark times came, we would really think we were in a tough spot. One author compared reading this Psalm to washing up on a deserted island and finding tracks in the sand. If you are experiencing darkness, this Psalm is a reminder that others have been where you are. So, let's take comfort, then, in acknowledging that the darkness is real.

The other part of this is that if the darkness is not real for me right now, it might be real for somebody else. So, let's do the best we can to open our eyes to this, that we don't allow those we love to suffer alone. Jesus, of course, faced some dark times of his own. There was a time when Jesus said to his three closest friends, ***"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death"*** (Matthew 26:38). But, Jesus also spent most of his ministry with those who were suffering – the sick, those with leprosy, those who were mourning a loss, those who were caught up in sin, and so on. Let's be like Jesus, then, and let's not be like Job's friends, who pretty much told him that if he would only pray harder, and repent of his sins, and trust God more, he would feel better. That wasn't Job's problem at all! Job needed some better friends.

So, because the darkness is real, let's be willing to be real with each other. Imagine asking how somebody's doing, and they respond like Jesus did, ***"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."*** You may be in that situation this morning. Or what if somebody responds like Heman does here? How are you doing this morning? "Well, my soul is full of trouble, I cried all night, I feel like I'd be better off dead, I have no strength, I'm in the pit, it's dark down here, I pray all the time, but God isn't listening, and it's been that way ever since I was a kid." How would we react to that? But isn't that what Heman is saying here? Even as a godly man, even as a leader in worship, this man knows that the darkness is real. And if he can say it, we can say it. Some of you here this morning may be reading Psalm 88, and you're able to say, "Yep, that is how it is!" Our response, then, is to ***"weep with those who weep"*** (Romans 12:15).

Conclusion:

I'm hoping we can get back to Psalm 88 next week, but today, we've learned that even for God's people, the darkness can be very real and lonely, and it can last a long time. This isn't a positive message by any means; in fact, this is one of the most challenging, one of the most depressing chapters anywhere in Scripture.

As we close today's lesson, I would ask: When's the last time we sang a song like this in worship? I don't know about you, but it seems to me that most of our songs are quite a bit more positive than this. Most of our songs probably lean toward the "blue skies and rainbows" variety. This morning, though, Caleb has agreed to lead us in several songs that are at least a bit more in line with Psalm 88. One of those is "While on the Sea," a Ukrainian folk hymn. Even the music of that song is a bit scary! But the song we plan on singing before the Lord's Supper was written by William Cowper [coo-per], an English poet, back in 1773, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" (#192). William Cowper suffered from depression most of his adult life, attempting unsuccessfully to take his own life at least three times. He spent a number of years in an asylum before ultimately dying of edema (or dropsy, as it was called back then). The song was first published as a poem entitled, "Light Shining Out of Darkness." Mr. Cowper, then, struggled with that darkness most of his life. But the song he wrote is certainly appropriate for our study this morning.

Before we continue with our song before the Lord's Supper, let's pray together:

Our Father in Heaven,

We know that you have been with us as we have studied these words from the 88th Psalm. The message from your word today has been dark and difficult, but we are thankful for it. We are thankful, because we know that even in dark times, you are still God. And today, we pray for those who struggle. We pray for peace. We pray for comfort. And we pray for those who help those who suffer in the darkness.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. We come to you through Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com