

## **Introduction:**

The psalms are easy to find in the Bible. You just take your Bible, open it in the middle, and voila! You have the psalms. Easy to access. What are the psalms? Psalms are songs. The psalter was used regularly for corporate worship in the Israelite community. In the psalter we find songs of praise, hurt, anger, lament, etc. Psalm 88 is a lament song. It is an individual lament. Written by a man named Heman – a worship leader in the community. Although it was originally written to express one man’s pain, it morphed into a communal lament – many believers, including us, have these words to lament together in our worship service.

This psalm is unique. It is a lament psalm, but unlike all the other lament psalms, Psalm 88 does not end in hope. Usually in a lament there is an expression of sadness – telling God about our pain. Then there is some sort of conclusion – like, “But I trust you” or “I will declare you name” or “I will wait for the Lord.”

Psalm 88 does not do that. Psalm 88 starts with sadness and ends with hopelessness.

Trinity Church, if you have ever experienced a pain so deep that you felt your heart would stop. If you have ever experienced anger and frustration at the pain God allowed and he never showed you why. If you have ever felt a grievance at God for what God has done. This psalm is for you.

## **Page 1:TT:**

In Psalm 88, Heman is expressing his enormous pain. Of course, we want to immediately ask the question...What happened to him? What’s the matter? What is hurting his heart? We do find out, but we see in this lament that it’s not only about what happened. Expressing pain is more

than just giving information. It is about how he is feeling and what he is doing to make sense of what happened.

One of the first things we see is the direction of his expression of pain. He looks upward and directs his prayer to the Lord. It is the Lord who is taking the brunt of his sadness, confusion, anger, frustration, and pain. He does not hold back. He says exactly what is in his heart. “I cry out before you all day and all night” “my soul is full of misery and my life touches hell” “I may as well be dead” “You have put me into the lowest pit as dark as the deepest depths of the sea” “Your anger is heavy upon me, and you afflict me with your waves” “You have done this. It’s your fault.”

He even taunts God. “Do you show miracles to the dead? Do ghosts rise up and praise you? Do they count your kindness in the grave? Or your faithfulness in destruction? Are your miracles made known in the darkness? How about your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?”

Heman tells God exactly how he feels. No filter. All we get here is raw emotion. When Heman cries out to God he does not present what is in his heart in some neatly packaged box with a bow with flowery words. He cries out in honesty and realness.

We also see that Heman is in so much pain, he can’t even use words. Words do not capture his sorrow very well, so Heman uses images.

One of the images is water. The darkest depths of the sea. Overwhelmed with waves. God’s terror and wrath have swept over like a flood. Allow me to jog your memory a bit as I remind us about the power of water. Remember only a few short months ago what happened in BC?

Here are a few pictures. Heman is saying, “this is how I feel.” No words. Images. Images can often express how we feel better than words.

Heman expresses his pain in another way. He speaks of words and images which evoke strong reactions. He writes of things all relating to death. The pit. The grave. Hades. Oblivion.

I'm sure when I say the word death, all sorts of feelings rise up within us. It conjures up pain we cannot speak of or imagine. Our own pain and the pain we bear for others. Trinity, I know you know this pain.

Heman is saying, "this is how I feel, God." No words. No images. Just feeling the feeling. And giving God the feeling.

And of course, Heman tells God what the matter is. He tells God what is hurting his heart. We don't know the specifics, but we get the general idea. It's his friends. His friends are gone. His friends think he is repulsive. All his companions and loved ones have abandoned him. He is alone. Unliked. Left out. No one inviting him to birthday parties. People in his community are intentionally keeping their distance like he has a disease. At the end of the psalm, he tells God who his best friend is: Darkness.

Ends the lament without any hope, without resolution, without answers. All there is - is darkness.

## **Page 2: TW:**

Darkness. We are reading a real person's lived experience. This was part of Heman's story. We all have our own individual lived experience. All of us here have a different story. We all have or have had enormous pain in our lives, and we need to express it. And as we see from this psalm, expressing the hurt in our heart is not only about giving information, but

it's also about how we are feeling and what we are doing to make sense of what happened.

For example, when I was a teenager, I had a plan for my life. I remember. I was going to graduate high school. I was going to go to university. I was going to meet my husband in there. But I wasn't going to get married right away, I wanted to live on my own for a couple years, then be married at 23 or 24. Then have kids a few years later. This was my plan. Well, I graduated from university as a single woman. I moved to live in the upstairs of a 3 bedroom bungalow with 4 other women. My 23rd and 24<sup>th</sup> birthdays rolled around and I do not want to tell you how I responded to my life not going according to my plan on those days. My heart was hurting and I expressed my pain in not healthy ways.

I had to make sense of what was going on. I had this plan, but then it was messed up. And now I'm over here being forced to live in this reality. I forget all the conversations and laments I had, but I do remember how I came to peace. I talked to other 23, 24, and 25 year old's and do you know what? They actually didn't have their life together. I thought as a teen that I was supposed to have figured all that out at the age, so when I didn't, it threw me through a loop. So, I had to lament and process with others and while I never got any answers, I came to a place where I could function.

We all have hopes and dreams and plans for our life. If there is anyone here who's life turned out exactly the way they wanted, can you raise your hand? Youth, can you be sure to look around? See any hands raised?

I invite you to raise your hand if you had a plan, God messed it up, and you were forced to live in a new reality. Keep them raised if this has happened to you more times than you can count. Youth, be sure to look around.

We all have an idea of what we want. Dream about it. Map it out. Live it. Then it can shatter. And then we must make sense of it. How do we make sense of it... in light of our faith? How do we make sense of terrible pain in light of believing in a God we testify as good?

For one, we could not move to the new reality. Deny it happened. Live in the past. A fantasy world. Get lost in our imagination. That is one way.

Two, we shut God out. Maybe it's easier to make sense of what happened in light of God by just trying to squeeze him out of the picture. Maybe we think it's easier to make sense of it in light of our faith by just trying to rid ourselves of our faith and deny God's very existence or deny his goodness.

Or three. We turn to God. We direct our raw and unedited emotions in prayer towards the Lord. Besides our words, we can also express how we feel in art. Humans long expressed feelings that way. It's common and healthy for us. This psalm in and of itself is poetry. It is song. If our words are not enough, we can use images. Sometimes images capture our sorrow better.

Water is a common image we give to God. I remember talking to someone once after a tragedy in their life and they often said it seemed like they were drowning or barely staying afloat. I often hear people speak of their grief as coming in waves. Doesn't have to be water. I remember hearing someone speak of the uncertainty of their life as the feeling of being in a tunnel. Something about not seeing any light but hoping to turn a corner to see the end.

In addition to mental images, we can create pictures. Consider this famous painting by Edvard Munch called the scream. Munch had a

troubled and traumatic childhood. He used images to express his innermost thoughts and feelings. This one of his is quite famous. Maybe we can't describe the exact feeling with words, but we can draw it. And when we see this image, somehow, we can understand.

Here's another example of a drawing. (black sharpie scribble). There are no words here, but somehow, we can understand. There is no need to be "good" at art to use it to express feelings.

And sometimes there are no words. Sometimes there are no images. All we have are all sorts of feelings that rise up within us. This is when all we can do is just breathe. When it feels like our heart may stop at any moment. When our eyes burn from crying out all day and all night. When we are full of misery and our life touches hell. We feel the feelings in the presence of the Lord.

And of course, we get to tell God what the matter is. We get to tell God what specifically is causing us pain. We get to give God everything. Nothing too big or too small. And there is no obligation on our part to end our lament in hope or happiness. We are not forced to go to the light and be happy when we are still hurting. There is just brutal honesty about the reality of living in a fallen world: People die. Marriages fail. Friends fight. Couples can't have children. Cancer, MS, disease, addictions exist. Fires, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, WAR! Sometimes it truly feels like darkness IS our closest friend.

### **Page 3: GT:**

Heman is expressing his reality to God. In Psalm 88 we see him pour out his agony in words, images, and feelings. We see him tell God what's the matter. Through it all we see the intense struggle of making sense of what happened in light of his faith. And I hope we don't miss what something so simple and so evident is in this psalm that I mentioned in the very beginning: Heman is turning toward God. There is still a deep trust there that God is good, and God is in control. John Calvin says that in here are unspoken words of hope.

The very act of turning to God in pain is an act of someone with great and steadfast faith.

We also see that Heman didn't only go to God. It's true Psalm 99 started out as an individual psalm. Heman's personal lament. And to say it morphed into being communal is a bit of an understatement. This psalm, Heman's words, is in our Bible. It has been used by Christian worshipping communities all over the world for thousands of years.

I'm not sure exactly how that happened because he was experiencing isolation, but we can see that Heman didn't keep his pain completely personal. Besides giving his feeling to the Lord, he also brought it out to his community. He did not make sense of his new reality in solitude, but he had others around him to wrestle together.

We can imagine that some people in his community could relate. We can also imagine that some could not. Regardless of whether they could understand what he was going through, they can still cry out to God together. They cry at God together. Heman does not shy away from writing that God is the reason for his pain.

The psalm says, "you have put me in the lowest pit" "your anger is heavy upon me" "you inflict me with all your waves" "why do you forsake my soul and hide your face?" "I bear your terrors" "Your anger has swept over me" "Your terrors have put an end to me."

Throughout this song, there is an unmistakable trust in the sovereignty of God. Simultaneously, God is the source of Heman's comfort and the cause of his pain. And Heman needs his community and God to make sense of this reality he is forced to live in. On one hand believing that God is good but experiencing evil. Believing that God rules perfectly but

experiencing being wronged. Trusting God knows what is best but experiencing confusion.

The very act of turning to God in pain is an act of someone with great and steadfast faith.

We don't get an explanation for God's sovereignty and evil here. I'm not even convinced that Heman is looking for answers. He is looking for an ear to hear. He is looking for love. He is looking for a friend. And he's looking to God to meet his needs.

#### **Page 4: GW:**

We get to take all our needs to God. Everything. We get to bring him our deepest pains, our grievances, and all our emotions. We can express our reality to God. Happy or bleak. Sometimes we think that “negative” emotions are bad somehow. That we should only be feeling happy and joyful. If we feel anger or sadness or anxiety, then something is wrong with us, and we try to suppress them. God says no – God says, “I want all of you. I created all your emotions, and they are all good in their proper place.”

Nothing is hidden from God. He knows all that is in our heart, so we do not need to feel the need to hide or present anything in a neatly wrapped package. This psalm shows us and models for us that we are allowed to give him the full brunt of our pain and feel no obligation to hold back anything. We can cry out in honesty and realness.

We are more than allowed to give God unfiltered words and images that we form in our minds or create on paper. He wants to know how we feel and be present with us as we ride the waves of feeling how we feel. And he knows how important it is for us to make sense of the reality of living in a fallen world.

We turn to God, and we turn to each other. Some of us can relate to the other's experiences and some of us can't. Regardless, we can still cry together. I got a message from a friend of mine a while ago. He is experiencing a lot of pain right now as his marriage may be ending. I don't know what that is like. I'm actually experiencing the opposite as I'm preparing for a wedding. He reached out to a few friends and together we can listen to him, pray with him, and cry out to God with him.

Maybe you come into church in a great mood and you're in a season of life that is bringing you great joy. Then as part of our worship, we sing a song of lament. You may ask the question... can I sing a song of lament if I'm not really feeling it? Yes, you can. Yes, you should. Because someone in the sanctuary is feeling that way. Just as we sing joyful songs together, we sing lament songs together.

God wants us to express what is really going on. Everything we feel is important to God. Imagine a young child who was made fun of at school. This hurts a lot. Imagine then they go to a trusted adult, and this trusted adult brushes them off and says, "get over it. That's no big deal."

God always has time because he is beyond time. He never brushes us off. It's not weird to imagine that he cries alongside of us. Maybe to the world it's not a big deal, but it doesn't need to be. If it's important to you, it's important to God.

When we go to God and cry out to him, it is an act of great and steadfast faith. We show all the powers and principalities that we trust God and his goodness and his sovereignty. Sometimes when we wrestle with God we want answers, but often times we just think we need them. We want an ear to hear. We want love. We want a friend.

We cry out to God, by ourselves and with others. And we also cry out with God. Our friend. The Bible records some of the things Jesus cried out when he was on the cross. He quotes Psalm 22 saying, “my God my God why have you forsaken me?” It is easy to imagine Jesus also saying and feeling what is recorded in Psalm 88. Picture Jesus saying the following from the cross:

“I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death.”

You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily on me”

You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them.”

“I am confined and cannot escape.”

“I have borne your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me.”

“You have done this.”

While he hung there, the Bible records darkness that came over the whole land around noon until 3 in the afternoon because the sun stopped shining. The curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Jesus experienced death until Sunday morning. Then he was risen from the dead. After his resurrection he was walking with a couple disciples to Emmaus. They didn’t recognize Jesus but were talking about him. And Jesus joined their conversation. They were confused because they saw how much he suffered and then he died...and they thought he was going to redeem his people. Then Jesus spoke to them and reminded

them that the Messiah had to suffer all those things before entering into glory.

How easy, even for the closest followers of Jesus, to forget that we follow a suffering servant for a Messiah. Heman looked forward to the Messiah in his song – not quite knowing it was Jesus who was his answer and his friend. We look back at the cross and all of Jesus life remembering that we suffer with Christ and we cry out to God with God. And with Christ, we can also trust God and call out to him and say, “Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit.” And with every breath we have left on this planet, may we use it to turn to the Lord.

Amen