**When your closest friend is darkness**

Text: Psalm 88

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**Scriptures:** 1 Kings 19:1- 8; Psalm 88; 2 Cor 4:7-18

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 211, 88, 32, 507, 180

**Series:** Occasional

**Theme:** In his intense and prolonged suffering, Heman the Ezrahite cries out to His God in prayer as he continues to experience apparent abandonment by the Lord and separation from his loved ones and friends.

**Proposition:** Be aware that faithful Christians can suffer from deep depression

**Introduction**

Mental illness is common and can have a severe impact on people’s lives. The 2016/17 New Zealand Health Survey found that: One in six New Zealand adults had been diagnosed with a common mental disorder at some time in their lives. This includes depression, bipolar disorders and debilitating anxiety.

The focus of this sermon is on depression. Depression can be defined as “*A mental condition characterized by feelings of severe despondency and dejection, typically also with feelings of inadequacy and guilt, often accompanied by lack of energy and disturbance of appetite and sleep*”.

Depression is **not** the sign of a weak character. Depression is **not** just someone occasionally ‘having a bad day’. People with depression **cannot** just ‘snap out of it’ or just choose to ‘pull their socks up’.

**Symptoms** of depression may include:

* Persistent low, sad or depressed mood.
* Loss of interest and pleasure in usual activities.
* Irritable mood.
* Change in sleeping patterns.
* Change in appetite.
* Decreased energy, tiredness and fatigue.
* Slowing down of speech and movement or increased agitation.
* Difficulty thinking clearly.
* Difficulty making even simple everyday decisions.
* Thoughts of worthlessness or guilt.
* Thoughts of hopelessness and death.

You likely know someone who has had, or is currently experiencing depression. You yourself may have done so in the past or may be at present. We meet many people in the Bible who have suffered from what could be described as depression, for example

* Elijah (1 Kings 19:4) ‘*he asked that he might die*’
* Jonah (4:8) "*It is better for me to die than to live*"
* David (Ps 32:3) “*when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long*”
* Jesus (Matt 26:38) “*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death*”
* Apostle Paul (2 Cor 1:8-10) ‘*we despaired of life itself*’
* Heman the Ezrahite, author of Psalm 88 “*my companions have become darkness*’ (v18b)

From these few Biblical examples we learn that the causes of depression are **complex and varied** – we’ll look at this in some more detail in our 2nd point.

A ‘lament’ is a ‘passionate expression of grief or sorrow’. Approximately a third of the 150 psalms are laments where the psalmist experiences suffering and disorientation. In all but Psalm 88, by the end of the psalm, the psalmist is re-oriented to hope and comfort in God. But not here in our text. This is the darkest of all the psalms. A ‘black hole’ in the midst of the Biblical psalter where Heman the Ezrahite suffers relentlessly.

Scholars are not sure exactly who Heman was – there are several men by that name mentioned in the Old Testament (1 King 4:31; 1 Chron 15:17, 19, 1 Chron 6:33). The exact identity of Heman is not important, what matters is that his intense suffering reflects the experience of many people.

Scholars are also not entirely sure what the term ‘maskil’ means, but the Hebrew root means to have insight or to teach. So, a Maskil may well be a teaching song.

This psalm certainly has much insight from which to instruct us about the experience of deep depression in the life of a believer. You may be surprised to learnalso that this psalm has much to teach us about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our three points this morning are:

1. Heman suffers greatly in the midst of the darkness

2. Heman attempts to diagnose the cause of the darkness

3. Heman continues to cry out to his Lord in faith

**1. Heman suffers greatly in the midst of the darkness**

Depression is a form of suffering, but unlike a broken leg, a cancer that shrivels the body, or a disease which changes the complexion of the face and skin, depression is a sickness which is hidden within. It has been said of depression that this “*profound melancholia is a day-in, day- out, night-in, night-out, almost arterial level of agony. It is pitiless, unrelenting pain that affords no window of hope, no alternative to a grim and brackish existence, and no respite from the cold undercurrents of thought and feeling that dominate the horribly restless nights of despair*” – Redfield Jamison in his book “An Unquiet Mind” (p114)

Often life does not meet our expectations – would you agree? In many circumstances there seems to be no happy ending.

* A pregnancy ends with a stillbirth.
* Surgery does not resolve a medical condition but makes it worse.
* Death suddenly robs a person of their life-long friend.
* Marriage becomes a battleground for a husband and wife.
* Unemployment results in a dark cloud descending on the mind.

There are many different ways to experience pain in this life are there not? Christian counsellor and author Ed Welch in his book “Depression – a stubborn darkness” records the personal account of a sufferer who went to his doctor in depression: This person said: *When the doctor came to my room, he said “I am going to ask you a question. If you don’t feel ready to answer it, please don’t. Then he asked, “who are you?”. I panicked “what do you mean?”. To which the doctor replied, “When you look inside, who do you see?” It was horrible. When I looked inside, I couldn’t see anyone. All I saw was a black hole. “I am no one” I said*. (pause)

Depression is a stubborn darkness. When the ‘black dog’ of depression comes to stay, he brings dark clouds which descend heavily on the soul. We can see the intense suffering of Heman in the psalm as his thoughts are **turned inwards** to his own distress. In the psalm we see his prayers of lament and sorrow (v2-5, v10-13) interspersed with accusations against His God (v6-9; 15-18). There’s a restless unsettledness of Heman’s soul reflected even in the structure and sequence of this psalm. For the benefit of our understanding today, we’ll separate out his laments from his accusations in the first two points of our sermon.

Heman experiences what could be described as a ‘living death’. He feels like someone who is as good as deceased. Hear his distressed words “*My life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; ... like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave*”. Physically he experiences weakness “*I am a man who has no strength*’ (v4), but the source of his malady is **not** in his body. He says (v3) “*My soul is full of troubles*”.

A sickness of the soul generally finds expression in the debilitation of the body. The medical profession may describe this type of linkage with the term ‘psychosomatic’ illness, disease or condition. We should not be surprised at this for we are made by God as body and soul, intricately connected within the very fabric of our being.

Think of our Lord Jesus Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. Hear his distressed words "*My soul is very sorrowful, even to death*” (Matt 26:38b). See the physical outworking of this anguish of soul in Luke’s gospel “*And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*” (Luke 22:44).

Notice in Psalm 88 that the suffering of Heman is **intensified** **because** he knows the LORD, the covenant God of Israel. It’s not so much that he is concerned about dying. In fact often those who are deeply depressed desire death as a way to take away the intense pain they experience. We saw this, in brief, from the experiences of Elijah, Jonah, and the Apostle Paul. The root cause of the great distress here is not physical death but spiritual death – separation from God.

Look with me at v5: Heman says he is: “*like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are* ***cut off from your hand***”. To be ‘cut off’ is to be forgotten by God, removed from His mind, His care, His presence, His goodness. For the man, woman, child of faith this is **the most intense form of suffering**. It is the prospect of Hell itself.

I have purposefully never watched Mel Gibson’s 2004 movie “The Passion of the Christ”. There are a number of reasons for this, for me the main one is that whilst the portrayal of the physical suffering of Jesus in this film may be quite accurate, the suffering of his soul cannot even begin to be adequately communicated and therefore the movie necessarily hugely, infinitely, under**-**represents the suffering of our Saviour.

Think about this. What was Jesus’s cry of pain on the cross? Not, ‘my hands and feet hurt where the nails pull on my flesh’. Not, ‘my lungs burn as I try to lift myself up for another breath’. Not, ‘my body is desperately weak from blood loss’. But, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is,* "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"(Matt 27:46). Here Jesus quotes from Psalm 22 – another psalm of lament.

Abandonment, isolation, rejection by God is what Heman felt, even though his feelings **did not** match the reality – as we’ll see later. Abandonment, isolation, rejection by God is what Jesus felt, his feelings **completely matching** the reality. Christ truly did suffer the ‘pains of hell’. Brothers and sisters, for our sake God made His own beloved Son to be sin, even though he knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21). When the righteous wrath of God fell on Jesus, Jesus was truly cut off from His Father. There is no greater suffering than that. No more intense pain for the soul.

Jesus was also cut off from his family and friends – all deserted him. “*He was despised and rejected by men*” (Isaiah 53:3). In Psalm 88, not only did Heman feel that God had abandoned him, he also felt isolated from his loved ones and friends (v18). Heman was not just ‘having a bad day’ - his suffering was prolonged, relentless, unceasing. He was chronically depressed. He explains that he had been “*afflicted and close to death from my youth up*” (v15).

At the end of this psalm there is yet no relief. There is no ‘happy ending’ to be found within our text. No light at the ‘end of the tunnel’. What a sad final clause “*my companions have become darkness*”.

What can we learn from Heman’s experience of depression in this maskil?

* Depression can last a long time in a person’s life – often there is no end in sight.
* Depression is acutely painful to the soul which often then weakens the body.
* Depression in the life of a Christian often has the additional pain of a sense of having been abandoned by God.
* Depression is private and isolating. Most/many depressed people suffer alone in great personal distress.
* Heman’s depression – the suffering of his soul and his experience of being separated from God and isolated from loved ones and friends points us to the greater suffering of Jesus who was truly separated from His Heavenly Father at the cross and was rejected by all.

The darkness of Psalm 88 foreshadows the greater darkness which Christ would later face in order to bring us light. What can you and I do to help those who suffer from this sickness of the soul? Here are a few thoughts:

1. **Be understanding**. Psalm 88 helps us in this, together with other psalms of lament. The Bible never ‘sugar-coats suffering’, but ‘tells it as it is’. The Lord has gifted us with the Biblical psalter which is an ‘*anatomy of the soul’* as John Calvin so aptly said.
2. **Avoid the temptation** to be
3. judgmental - ‘he/she has likely sinned and therefore probably deserves to suffer’.
4. critical - ‘you’ve got no reason to be depressed, look at all you’ve been blessed with, there are many people far worse off than you are’) or
5. impatient - ‘just take a concrete pill and harden up’, ‘hurry up, get over it!’, ‘get a grip on yourself’
6. Like Job’s friends did at first, **go and just sit** with the sufferer (Job 2:13). Be there for them to show your heartfelt sympathy and comfort.
7. Unlike Job’s friends, in general **keep your mouth shut**. Say little if anything. When you speak choose your words extremely carefully. The wounded, suffering soul is very fragile. Be gentle, kind and compassionate; just as Jesus is to you.
8. **Be aware** that the sufferer who is turned inward may mis-diagnose the reasons for their own depression. This is what Heman did, as we’ll see in our 2nd point.

**2. Heman attempts to diagnose the cause of the darkness**

It’s a common human trait to look for someone to blame when things go wrong, when life hurts – especially if we didn’t expect it to be such a painful experience. Surely someone should be held accountable. Where should the ‘buck stop’? Find the culprit. Charge the one who is responsible.

Throughout this psalm, Heman gets into the ‘blame game’ and his target is God! Listen to the sheer force of his accusations **against the Lord** (v6-8): ‘***You*** *have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep’* (v6). ‘***Your*** *wrath lies heavy upon me, and* ***you*** *overwhelm me with all* ***your*** *waves’* (v7). ‘***You*** *have caused my companions to shun me;* ***you*** *have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow.’* (8-9a) ‘*O LORD, why do* ***you*** *cast my soul away?’ (*v14a) ‘*Why do* ***you*** *hide your face from me?’* (v14b) ‘*Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer* ***your*** *terrors; I am helpless.’* (v15) ‘***Your*** *wrath has swept over me;* ***your*** *dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together.’* (v16-17) ‘***You*** *have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness*.’ (v18)

Who is responsible for the psalmist’s deep and prolonged depression? According to Heman, in the midst of his darkness, the answer is clear as day - God is!

The key question which Psalm 88 raises is this: “Has Heman self-diagnosed the right cause of his depression?” Is God responsible for his unrelenting suffering? What do you think? (pause) Is God, the Sovereign Lord, who ‘works all things according to the counsel of his will’ ultimately responsible for all human suffering including depression?

This is type of question raises what is often termed ‘the problem of evil’. If God is all powerful (He is) and If God is completely good (He is) why is there suffering? Surely a completely good and infinitely powerful God could prevent all suffering. Why then doesn’t He? (pause).

The book of Job helps us to grapple with some deep truths here. We know from Scripture that Job suffered because God allowed Satan to afflict him. And the LORD said to Satan, "*Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand*." (Job 1:12).

God **never ceased** to be in control, yet God **did no evil** in allowing Satan to act with wicked intent against His ‘blameless and upright’ servant Job. God worked **through** the wickedness of Satan to bring good to Job. After his suffering Job confesses to God “*I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,* ***but now*** *my eye sees you*” (Job 42:5)

In the same way, God worked through the evil of Joseph’s brothers to bring good, not only to them but to many others: Joseph identifies the evil purpose of his brothers working alongside the good purpose of God in the same sequence of events: *As for you,* ***you meant*** *evil against me, but* ***God meant*** *it for good, to bring it about that many peopleshould be kept alive, as they are today*. (Gen 50:20)

God’s sovereign purposes work alongside (concurrently with) the purposes of people. WCF3.1 expresses this deep Scriptural truth in these words: *“God, from all eternity, did—by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will—freely and unchangeably ordain what­ever comes to pass. Yet he ordered all things in such a way that he is not the author of sin, nor does he force his creatures to act against their wills; neither is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established”.*

God is the ‘primary cause’, but He chooses to work through ‘secondary causes’. He works evil in the world for good, without being the author of that evil. So God **does not merely allow** suffering, He **decrees suffering**, yet He is perfectly good, working all things together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).

So Heman has part of the truth about the cause of his suffering, but not the whole truth; he is therefore dangerously following a half-truth, the likes of which Satan relishes to exploit. Satan takes advantage of a life turned inward. A person suffering from depression is particularly vulnerable to spiritual attack. Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44) pursues relentless accusation. So Heman, a man of faith, **thinks** that the wrath of God lies heavy on him (v7). In the relentless darkness of his depressed soul **he believes** that God is against him.

However, there is no indication from the psalm itself that Heman is in a state of unrepentant sin, unlike David’s condition which he describes in Psalm 32:3-4 “*when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up1 as by the heat of summer*”.

Depression, in part or in full, **can be** the result of unconfessed sin; however Psalm 88 teaches us that this is **most certainly not always the case**. In fact, there are many possible causes for depression which include:

**a) Physical factors** e.g. disease, sickness, aging, post-natal struggles, chemical imbalances in the brain, hormonal influences.

* Medication can be very helpful in assisting with the treatment of depression. Pharmaceutical drugs wisely administered can bring stability to the troubled mind then allowing other assistance (etc. counselling, pastoral care) to be effective.
* As an aside, I didn’t mention medication in relation to anxiety a few weeks ago, but here also, pharmaceutical drugs can assist in controlling anxiety attacks, enabling the sufferer to grow in developing spiritual and mental strength so that trust in the Lord’s provision for the future may be more readily exercised.
* For some people, medication may be necessary for a prolonged period, for some this assistance may be required for their whole lives. However, other emotional and spiritual help is also needed.

**b) The effect of living in a fallen world** e.g. natural disasters, sickness, aging, accidents. All suffering is symptomatic of a groaning creation. We cannot escape it in this life.

**c) The effect of other people’s sin** e.g. sexual abuse, violence, theft, injustice, slander, gossip, thoughtlessness, carelessness, stupidity. When Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 19th century English reformed (‘particular’) Baptist preacher was 22 he was pastor of a large church. He was preaching to thousands in the Surrey Gardens Music Hall when pranksters yelled “fire,” starting a panic to exit the building which killed 7 and left 28 people severely injured. His mind was never the same again. His wife, Susannah, wrote, “*My beloved’s anguish was so deep and violent, that reason seemed to totter in her throne, and we sometimes feared that he would never preach again*.” Spurgeon suffered from depression for much of his life after this event.

It is clear both from Scripture and from general observation that the causes of depression are usually complex and multi-facetted. To judge that a person who is depressed or downcast is necessarily suffering due to their own sin is both unbiblical in light of Scriptures like Psalm 88 and is also extremely damaging to the sufferer.

In my view, some in the nouthetic counselling movement are misguided in this area, over-simplifying the complexity of the suffering human soul with statements like: “*Depressed persons whose symptoms fail to show any sign of a biochemical root should be counselled on the assumption that they are depressed by guilt*” (Jay Adams, Competent to Counsel, p126)

Just as the depressed person, like Heman, often has a distorted view of the causes of their suffering, so people like you and me, are likely also to have a distorted view of someone else’s situation, especially in this area of depression with all the complexities which are often involved. How then can a person suffering through the darkness of depression find help?

This question leads us to our 3rd point:

**3. Heman continues to cry out to his Lord in faith**

As far as I know, we’ve never sung Psalm 88 here in congregational worship before (at least not from the new green STTL book). However clearly from the title of the psalm, these words were written to be sung by God’s people: A SONG. A PSALM OF THE SONS OF KORAH. TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO MAHALATH LEANNOTH. A MASKIL OF HEMAN THE EZRAHITE

Yet this is not a joyful psalm, it doesn’t directly give gospel hope, it contains no ‘happy ending’ so why is it in the Bible? It’s not just that Heman, in his downcast state, wrote this psalm as an introspective, navel-gazing, self-centred exercise in turned-inwardness. No. God, by His Spirit, in His perfect wisdom, inspired these words for our instruction, comfort, edification and wellbeing. The words of Psalm 88, dark though they are, speak of Christ, the Light of the World. There is actually Sonshine (pun intended!) amongst the gloom - come and have a look with me!

Notice first that Heman has **not** lost his faith! He is praying, crying out, to the LORD – the covenant God of Israel – who He confesses (v1) is the God of **my** salvation. His is not an occasional feeble prayer, prayed as an afterthought. His is a fervent, continuous, heartfelt, petition, to His God “*O LORD, God of my salvation; I cry out day and night before you*”. He feels like his life is a living death, yet He is spiritually alive! There is no indication in the psalm that by the end of his lament he has stopped praying.

What does this teach us? The depressed Christian must cry out to the Lord in faith. The depressed Christian must continue to cry out to the Lord in faith in the midst of the stubborn darkness which does not readily abate.

So here’s the difficulty: When we are feeling low, abandoned, downcast, isolated, it can be very hard to pray, very hard to cry out to the Lord. Very hard to do anything at all. I was talking with someone recently about the struggle of anxiety and depression. This person said, ‘I suppose I need to push myself’ then they said, ‘maybe I need to **stretch** myself’. I think that’s a very helpful way of describing the right human response to suffering in general, and depression here in particular.

Some personal ‘stretching’ is called for. A reaching out to the God who is there. This is hard. Yet it is the right path. In Psalm 88, Heman ‘stretches’ himself to keep praying, to keep communication with God. Consider this - even though his view of God is distorted, warped and in error, yet the Lord hears his cry and there is no condemnation, no judgement of God upon this suffering saint. Congregation, our God is ‘*compassionate and merciful*’ (James 5:11), ‘*gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*” (Ps 103:8). This is His general disposition to those in need. This is His disposition towards those who are depressed – surely we should minister in like manner to one another.

Notice, secondly that for Heman God is still his Saviour! He continues to look the Lord for deliverance, despite his confusion, disorientation, distress and pain. He addresses His Maker as “*LORD, God of my salvation*”. The Hebrew word for salvation is Jeshua, which we know in its Greek form ‘Jesus’. Remember the words of the Angel of the Lord to Joseph about his betrothed Mary: **“***She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*." (Matt 1:21)

Heman, an OT saint, lived on the ‘other side of the cross’ before Jesus lived on this earth. He looked forward in faith to the God of his salvation. He trusted that deliverance was coming, but He didn’t know exactly how God would bring His promised salvation.

On this ‘side of the cross’ we see more than he did. We know Jesus, who saves His people from their sins. We know that Christ understands our suffering, for as we’ve already seen, He suffered more than you and I ever will.

Whether you are downcast, depressed or in despair today, or whether you are uplifted, confident in the Lord, and your soul flooded with light, know this brothers and sisters in Christ: “*We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God… we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*” (Heb 4:14-16)

Brothers and sisters in the Lord - Jesus Christ, on the cross of Calvary has fully appeased the righteous wrath of God against your sin. “*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins*” (1 John 4:10).

We can approach God with confidence through Christ our Saviour. We can do this in every circumstance of life, no matter how painful. Heman’s depression distorted his reason. His mind was bent inwards. He thought that God’s wrath was heavy on him…but it was not! He felt guilty, but He was trying to carry a burden which was not his to bear! As a man of faith, like Abraham, His faith was credited to Him as righteousness. Christ was His Saviour, for He believed God to be the God of His salvation.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, Satan loves to tell us that we deserve to feel guilty. That God’s wrath remains on us. This is partially true. We do deserve to be guilty, but God does not give us what we deserve. So this partial truth is actually a lie.

Brothers and Sisters in the Lord, Christ has taken our place on the cross. When we repent of our sins, there is no place, no reason, for guilt or shame. There is only God’s favour towards us! Believing Christian, at times it may seem to you that God’s wrath is heavy on you, but if you are repentant of your sins, it is not!

At times it may seem that God has abandoned you – He has not! *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? …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”* (Romans 8:35-39 abbreviated)

At times it may seem to you that you are utterly alone, that all your friends, family, brothers and sisters in Christ have abandoned you. For most of us this is very unlikely, but even if it were the case, you always have a friend in Jesus who will never leave or forsake you.

Jesus is the Light of the World. God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. God does not promise us to be freed from mental illness in this life. God does not promise that we will never suffer from depression. But God does promise us salvation, a way out, ‘light at the end of the tunnel’. Ultimately a ‘happy ending’.

What is the state of your mind today? Are you turned inwards? If you are experiencing darkness of the soul, you need Christ. If you are not currently in that state of experiencing feelings of abandonment by God and by your friends and loved ones, unless you have Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, one day you will.

The day is coming when you will leave all the friends and loved ones you know in this life (or if you live long enough, they will leave you). The grave is a very lonely place without Christ. It is a place of utter abandonment without the Lord. It is a place of relentless darkness without a Saviour.

But in Christ, the grave opens up the fullness of life without suffering, without depression, without darkness. It’s good to sing this maskil of Heman the Ezrahite from time to time in this life as the Lord ministers to us and teaches us about suffering. In the New Heavens and New Earth to come, there will be no suffering, no darkness, no depression, no unreliable feelings, no accusations against the Lord, no confusion, no disorientation, no desire for death. There will only be light and life. There will only be close fellowship with Christ and His people.

Until that day, keep crying out to the Lord in faith, trusting Him to bring you safely home through the trials and sufferings that often attend this life.

AMEN