

The Man in Psalm 88

*Bible Commentary by Joseph F. Harwood
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Psalm 88 is the prayer of a man mired deep in affliction. The psalmist begins his prayer by addressing the Lord, the God of his salvation. He then recalls that he has cried out day and night to the Lord, and he pleads with Him yet again to incline His ear to his cry for help. He is overwhelmed by his troubles.

Beginning in verse 4 we read:

I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit;
I have become like a man without strength,
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. (Psalm 88:4-5)

In these verses, we see that the psalmist felt that he was drawing near to death and had been forsaken by the Lord his God. Jesus also experienced this feeling that He had been abandoned by God His Father as He was dying on the cross, and He cried out in a loud voice: “My God, My God. Why have you forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46).

As the psalm continues, we see that the psalmist understands that God is sovereign over His creation. And therefore, he understands and acknowledges that it is God Himself who has caused this depth of affliction to come upon him, even to the point where his own friends find him to be repulsive and are driven away from him.

When we think about the fact that the psalmist was made to experience such affliction that even his own friends turned away from him, we might call to mind Isaiah 53:3, where we learn that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, experienced the

same kind of sufferings. He was despised and rejected by others; He was a man of sorrows who was familiar with suffering. He was like one from whom people hid their faces; He knew what it was like to be despised and not esteemed (Isaiah 53:3).

The psalmist sees no escape from his suffering. And yet in verse 9 we see that he continues to call upon the Lord every day in prayer, knowing that his salvation and his honor depend upon God alone. (Psalm 62:7, many others.)

When we consider the psalmist's steadfast clinging to the Lord in prayer despite his deep and ongoing affliction, we might also consider the time when Jesus gave a hard teaching to the crowds, as recorded in John 6:53-66, and many of His disciples turned away from Him and followed Him no more. Jesus then turned to the twelve and asked them if they also wanted to leave. Peter replied, saying: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God." (John 6:68-69).

The psalmist also understood, as did Peter, that there was no one else to whom he could go, but to the Lord, the God of his salvation (verse 1). Every genuine believer has this same Spirit within them, who causes them to continue to cling to God their Father and their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, no matter how hard their circumstances or how deep their affliction. They persevere not because of their own personal steadfastness, rather they persevere because they are upheld and protected by the power of God (1 Peter 1:3-9).

In verse 14, the psalmist asks God, why? Why has all this suffering come upon him, and why has God not answered his prayer for help, when he has cried out to Him day and night. He feels that God has rejected him, and he wants to know why God has hidden His face from his suffering and grief.

Unlike other psalms, in which the psalmists acknowledge that the affliction which has come upon them is the result of their own sin (Psalm 6, 38, 39, 40, 41, 51), the man in Psalm 88 apparently could see no reason for the sufferings that he had been made to endure, and he asked God, why? The answer to the psalmist's question of why this apparently undeserved suffering had come upon him would be revealed to God's people centuries later through Jesus' teaching in John 12:24-26.

In these verses, Jesus revealed the universal principle of spiritual fruit bearing that God ordained for His life and for the lives of all those who follow

Him. Jesus taught that *unless* a “grain of wheat” falls to the earth and “dies”, it will remain only single grain of wheat, but if it “dies”, it will bear much fruit.

The “grain of wheat” was the metaphor that Jesus used to symbolize His life and the lives of all those who follow Him. The “death” of the grain of wheat is the death of all that we want for ourselves in this life, if God our Father should require it of us: things which include the gratifications we would like to experience, as well as the freedom from suffering we would like to enjoy. (Consider Matthew 26:36-46, Luke 14:27, 33.)

Jesus taught us in John 12:25 that these “deaths” will make us “hate” our lives in this world, and the man in Psalm 88 must surely have hated his life of affliction. However, we can take comfort in knowing that we are not among those who love their lives in this world but will lose it for eternity. Rather, we are among those who, even though we will hate our lives in this world as we share in the sufferings of Christ, we will one day share in His glory together with Him in Heaven. (Consider Luke 6:20-26, Luke 16:19-31, John 16:20-22.)

All of us, who by God’s grace and by His sovereign choice, have been called to faith in His Son Jesus Christ, have been given the privilege of serving Him. As His servants, we *must*, and we will, follow Him (John 12:26), sharing in His sufferings in some measure, as God has ordained for each of us individually. And through these sufferings we will bear fruit (John 12:24) and one day realize a share in Christ’s eternal glory (Romans 8:17-18).

We know that all of Jesus’ sufferings were undeserved; they came about through no fault or wrongdoing of His own (Hebrews 4:15, others). And yet they were sufferings that God the Father had ordained for His life, through which He would bear much fruit in bringing many to glory (Hebrews 2:10).

In the same way, our share in Christ’s sufferings are sufferings which come about through no fault or wrongdoing of our own. Rather, they are sufferings which come about according to the sovereign plan and purpose of God for our lives, through which we will bear fruit and demonstrate that we are in truth Jesus’ disciples (John 15:8).

When we endure suffering in our lives, and we can see no reason that such troubles have come upon us, then we also, like the man in Psalm 88, will ask God why. The answer as to why our sovereign God allows undeserved suffering to touch the lives of His people is given to us in John 12:24-26. The man in Psalm 88

did not have this insight, but God in His wisdom revealed it to us these last times (1 Peter 1:20).

This principle of spiritual fruit bearing that Jesus revealed in John 12:24-26 was at work in His life and has also been at work in the lives of every one of God's people, even from the Book of Genesis, where we saw Joseph's sufferings and the good that God brought about through them. This same principle was also at work in the psalmist's life and will be at work in the lives of every one of God's people, until Christ's second coming. We will all bear fruit as we share in the sufferings that Jesus endured, in the ways and in the measure that God our Father has ordained for each of us.

Psalm 88 does not end with the expression of confidence in God's deliverance that we see in many other psalms, but the psalmist ends his petition to the God of his salvation by lamenting that He has removed both friends and loved ones far from him, and the darkness is his closest friend (verse 18). We learn from Psalm 88 that there will be times in our lives when we cannot see God's imminent deliverance from the troubles we are facing, despite our crying out to Him day and night in prayer.

In such times, like the man in Psalm 88, all we will know to do is to continue to cry out to the God of our salvation in prayer. We should not doubt but know and understand that our God will not allow us to "sink under the waves and perish" with those who do not know Him (Matthew 14:30-31). Rather, the time is coming when our sovereign God will reach out His hand to deliver us from our present troubles so that we may continue to serve Him here on earth, or He will reach out His hand to deliver us into His heavenly kingdom, where we will be forever free from everything that threatens and causes harm.