

**SBC – Dec. 7, 2025**

**Psalm 88:1-18 (NKJV)**

**“A Prayer of Desperation”**

**A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. To the Chief Musician. Set to “Mahalath Leannoth.” a Contemplation of Heman the Ezrahite.**

This is a fairly long introduction for a Psalm.

Clearly this composition was intended to be sung as a song. It is a very SAD song. This is said to be the saddest Psalm in the Psalter.

It is part of the body of Psalms attached to the sons of Korah who was a rebel Levite back in the days of Moses (Numbers 16).

The Koathites were Levites who were gatekeepers at the temple, and they also became famous as musicians (cf. 1 Chron. 6:22; 9:17-32; 26:1; 2 Chron. 20:19). They are tied to 11 of the Psalms in the book of Psalms with Psalm 88 being the last one (Ps. 42, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 84, 85, 87, 88).

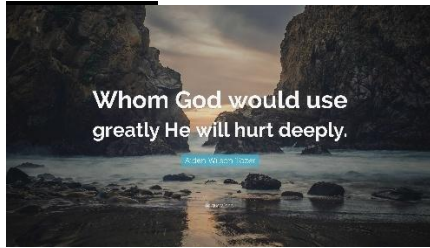
It was addressed to the Chief Musician otherwise known as the choir director. It was set to “Mahalath Leannoth.” This may refer to the musical instrument, perhaps something like a reed pipe played on sad occasions and was intended to be used with the Psalm.

The word Contemplation (also translated as “Maskil” can have various nuances, such as that which is contemplative or instructive. This is one of 13 Psalms so designated.

Heman the Ezrahite. He was a musician from the family of the Kohathites who founded a choir (cf. 1 Chron. 6:33; 2 Chron. 5:12; 35:15). Ezahite may mean “native born” or refer to the name of a family clan. He lived in the days of David and Solomon and is often referenced.

- *His great wisdom ([1 Kings 4:31](#)).*
- *His being a Kohathite, among the sons of Korah ([1 Chronicles 6:33](#)).*
- *His musical ability and service ([1 Chronicles 6:33](#), [15:17-19](#), [16:41-42](#), [25:1](#); [2 Chronicles 5:12](#), [35:15](#)).*
- *His many and exceptional sons and daughters ([1 Chronicles 25:5-6](#)).*
- *His service to the king ([1 Chronicles 25:6](#)). (Source David Guzik)*

In many ways he lived a blessed life – a life of special service to God. And yet there was also a LOT of hurt in His life as expressed in this saddest of all the Psalms.

**Slide # 1**

*"In this Psalm, Heman makes a map of his life's history, he puts down all the dark places through which he has traveled. He mentions his sins, his sorrows, his hopes (if he had any), his fears, his woes, and so on. Now, that is real prayer, laying your case before the Lord."*

**-Charles Spurgeon**

**Slide # 2****Psalm 88*****"A Prayer of Desperation"***

- vv. 1-2 Crying Out for God to Hear
- vv. 3-5 The Depth of Affliction
- vv. 6-9 God seen as the Source of Affliction
- vv. 10-12 Shall the Dead Praise God?
- vv. 13-15 An Impassioned Prayer of "Why"?
- vv. 16-18 Engulfed in Despair

**1 O LORD, God of my salvation, I have cried out day and night before You.**

**2 Let my prayer come before You; Incline Your ear to my cry.**

He starts out on a good note, emphasizing that the LORD (YHWH) is the God of his salvation. Clearly, his trust was in the Lord, and He knew Him as a God of deliverance. This reality is in the background throughout the rest of the Psalm – even in the depths of his despair. This foundational truth carries him through in spite of all the gloom, despair, and depression seen in his life.

It is to YHWH, the God of his salvation, that he cried out day and night.

*"The only ray of comfortable light which shines throughout the Psalm. The writer has salvation, he is sure of that, and God is the sole author of it. While a man can see God as his Saviour, it is not altogether midnight with him." - **Charles Spurgeon***

**3 For my soul is full of troubles, And my life draws near to the grave.**

This was no shallow issue – it went deep into the soul. His soul was so full of troubles that it threatened to kill him physically. A soul full of troubles does not equal a well person.

**4 I am counted with those who go down to the pit; I am like a man who has no strength,**

**5 Adrift among the dead, Like the slain who lie in the grave, Whom You remember no more, And who are cut off from Your hand.**

Those around him expected him to die! He was not well! He had no strength. He pictures death pulling him adrift of the course of life and he was helpless to do anything about it.

We see here a lack of knowledge regarding what happens after death. He feared death would mean being cut off not only from relationship of life and even from his relationship with God.

It is wrong to take these agonized words as evidence that there is no life beyond death. The Old Testament has a shadowy understanding of the world beyond. ... The book of Psalms and the Old Testament in general do not present a comprehensive theology of the world beyond. The book of Psalms expresses the agony, fear, and uncertainty of death's doorstep. The singers in the psalms often *know* they can remember God and give Him thanks now, but don't have the same certainty about the world beyond. – **David Guzik**

We often don't realize how very blessed we are to have the NT Scriptures that drip with assurance. In the OT there were glimpses of assurance but there was also a lot of murkiness as reflected here. In contrast...

### **Slide # 3**

**2 Timothy 1:10 (NKJV)**

**10** but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has **abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,**

There is no murkiness in the NT – absent from the body – present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). To die for the believer is gain (Phil. 1:21).

**6 You have laid me in the lowest pit, In darkness, in the depths.  
7 Your wrath lies heavy upon me, And You have afflicted me with all  
Your waves. Selah**

You or Your is mentioned in reference to God four times here. Clearly he saw God as the source (either directly or indirectly) behind all he was going through.

The OT writers consistently traced whatever they were going through back to God. Thus, they had a HIGH view of the sovereignty of God! This wasn't merely "bad luck" or "happenstance". God was behind it all as He sovereignly controls all things – and indeed He does.

He does not protest that this is unfair, but simply expresses it. He speaks of it in terms of all of God's waves.

Like the waves rolling onto the seashore, so God has directed trouble after trouble on the psalmist (cf. v. 17). – ***John MacArthur***

I think he was feeling a lot like Job about now. We often say, "When it rains, it pours," and sometimes it seems like the flood waters just keep coming.

**8 You have put away my acquaintances far from me; You have made me an abomination to them; I am shut up, and I cannot get out;**

He was abandoned by his friends and acquaintances who want nothing to do with him in his condition. He is like shut up in isolation with no escape from the situation. He felt desperate and yet desperately hopeless.

He says he is "an abomination" to his acquaintances. They couldn't stand him. Some think this may mean he had a loathsome disease, something like leprosy which condemned him to strict isolation.

One of the hardest things in life is when you have to go through something all alone and no one is there for you! That is really hard. Job's friends essentially abandoned him and turned into critics. His wife spoke twice to him (as we have recorded). In Job 2:9 she told Job, "Curse God and die!" How is that for soothing words of comfort? In Job 19:17, Job said, "My breath is offensive to my wife." Not much comfort there!

It is bad when those closest to you no longer want to be around you!

**9 My eye wastes away because of affliction. LORD, I have called daily upon You; I have stretched out my hands to You.**

This seems to be a way of him saying that he was crying his eyes out over this affliction. He has been calling daily upon the LORD, but to no avail! Sometimes it seems prayer is all one way. And so Heman bemoans...

**10 Will You work wonders for the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise You? Selah**

Death to him seems like THE END! If God didn't work for him in the here and now, what hope was there? He asks: Shall the dead arise and praise You?

**Selah** – This calls for thoughtful contemplation.

As NT Christians, we respond with “Well, most certainly they will!”

**11 Shall Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave? Or Your faithfulness in the place of destruction?**

**12 Shall Your wonders be known in the dark? And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?**

Here, he asks a series of questions, all essentially making the same point. He is trying to make the point that God will continue to receive his praise if he is restored in this life, but in contrast, he is no good in this way if he is dead.

The way he describes death here shows that many of the OT saints had a lot of uncertainty about the afterlife.

#### **Slide # 4**

- v. 10 The place of no “wonders”
- v. 10 The place of no “praise”
- v. 11 God’s lovingkindness and faithfulness is not declared
- v. 11 The place of destruction
- v. 12 The dark
- v. 12 The land of forgetfulness

That doesn't sound too inviting. No wonder he is so passionate about asking God for more time in the here and now.

He describes death as “the land of forgetfulness”.

Perhaps he thinks that once he is gone, he won’t even matter anymore to God as he goes to the nether-nether world. And perhaps he is thinking that soon after I am gone, those on earth will no longer remember me either.

I remember as a young, unsaved guy being on the harvest crew way up in Montana on the Canadian border. For miles and miles, no one was around. And I had this thought, “If I died out here, no one would even know.” And then, if you think about it, when people die, how long are they remembered?

Maybe for a few years by a few people close to them, but then largely forgotten by almost everyone. But again, informed by NT truth, we know that God does not forget. But death is not the land of forgetfulness when it comes to God.

### **Slide # 5**

#### **Hebrews 6:10 (NKJV)**

**10** For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.

In view of the dismal prospects of death, he continues...

**13 But to You I have cried out, O LORD, And in the morning my prayer comes before You.**

The sense seems to be: Although up to this point I have received no answer yet, I will continue to hope and pray.

He has been intense in prayer over this matter, and it is wearing on him and so he blurts out...

**14 LORD, why do You cast off my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me?**

Here come the proverbial “why” questions.

He feels put off by God and wonders aloud WHY! Why is God hiding the face of His blessing and favor?

What a miserable condition. He was without health, without friends, without an answer from God! Why? Why?

The WHY questions are some of the most common to humanity!

Often, we don't know why! Often, there are no specific answers! And when going through a season like this, it is good to remember that we are not the first to experience this. This was a JOB like experience. Job had all kinds of questions too! It is not uncommon for the most godly among us to go through something like this.

Although despondent, he still trusts God, he is still looking to God, calling God by His sacred covenant name YHWH four times in this prayer.

### **Slide # 6**

v. 1 O YHWH, God of my salvation...

v. 9 YHWH, I have daily called upon You...

v. 13 But to you I cried out, O YHWH...

v. 14 YHWH, why do you cast off my soul?

**15 I have been afflicted and ready to die from my youth; I suffer Your terrors; I am distraught.**

Here we have some insight! This has been working on him for many years. He is in a chronic situation. This affliction has been with him since his youth, seemingly of such a nature that it could have killed him at any point along the way.

And this was terrifying and he was distraught!

We don't know what this affliction was, but it was something very serious!

Sometimes people are given a lifelong ailment that they wrestle with their whole life. It is terrible! They cry out for relief but nothing happens! They feel they are out of God's favor or that they have done something wrong, and yet they don't know what. But it leaves them with the feeling that something is wrong in their relationship with God.

**16 Your fierce wrath has gone over me; Your terrors have cut me off.**

He held that God is sovereign over it and expressed it in terms of experience, His fierce wrath, and His terrors, which serve to destroy him.

**17 They came around me all day long like water; They engulfed me altogether.**

He pictures these afflictions as being like a flood of water surrounding him that is closing in on him, ready to drown him.

**18 Loved one and friend You have put far from me, And my acquaintances into darkness.**

Loved ones and friends alike are now distanced from him and he puts it on God! God has sovereignly allowed this.

The last phrase, “my acquaintances into darkness,” is a little difficult. The Holman Christian Standard translates it this way.

### **Slide # 7**

#### **Psalm 88:18 (HCSB)**

**18 You have distanced loved one and neighbor from me; darkness is my only friend.**

When Paul Simon began the song *Sound of Silence* with the phrase, *Hello darkness, my old friend*, he was not the first to express the idea. – **David Guzik**

"The Sound of Silence" by [Paul Simon](#) is a poignant song about **alienation**, the breakdown of communication, and the coldness of modern society, using powerful imagery like "talking without speaking" and worshipping a "neon god" (technology/media) as metaphors for people's **inability to connect** meaningfully and their obsession with superficiality. It reflects youthful disillusionment and warns of a growing societal detachment where genuine understanding is lost amidst noise and distraction, a theme still relevant today. - **AI**

I think the Psalmist was feeling something like this: Totally disconnected where he could say something like “Hello darkness, my old friend.”

Isolation, loneliness, and abandonment are one of the hardest experiences in life. It leaves you all alone with DARKNESS your old friend (so to speak).

And that is how the Psalm ends! We don't expect this. We expect Psalms to start with despondence, but to end to in celebratory praise. But not here.

There is no answer! Nothing has changed!

I think the point is that sometimes we just have to cling to what we know no matter what – no matter if circumstances never change.

Our foundation is YHWH is the God of our salvation. We continue to cling to the truth of YHWH, our promise-keeping God. Even through all the WHY questions, despite the desertion of friends and acquaintances, in spite of continuing ill health, in spite of what seems to be unanswered prayer, in spite of fears and terrors, in spite of having a soul full of troubles, in spite of being reduced to darkness as our old friend, through it all we still cling to YHWH is the God of our salvation.

This is the place where Job said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." (Job 13:15).

And we know that God has a sovereign purpose that ultimately works all things together for those who love God (Rom. 8:28).

Listen to the testimony of J.N. Darby. He said that at one time this was the only Scripture that was any help to him because he saw that someone had been as low as that before him. – **William MacDonald**

There is something comforting about knowing you are not the only one – about not going through something totally all by yourself.

Peter, writing to the suffering saints at the end of the letter, essentially signed off with this note of encouragement in 1 Pet. 5:9...

**1 Peter 5:9 (NKJV)**

**9** Resist him, [the is the devil] steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

In the book of Revelation, John began his letter with these words in Revelation 1:9...

**Revelation 1:9 (NKJV)**

**9** I, John, both your brother and **companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ**, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Note these three words go together – tribulation, kingdom, and patience (or perseverance). As believers, we can expect to experience all three in their proper order. Right now, we are called to carry a cross, and we are called to persevere on. That is not easy. And this continues till we die! But then comes the kingdom!

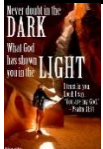
**Acts 14:22 (NKJV)**

**22** strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, “We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”

We often say there is something in the Psalms for whatever you are going through. It has application to the whole of life.

Many of God’s greatest saints have known seasons of terrible depression and despair. If you go through one of those seasons, it is texts like this the Spirit may use to minister to you in a very special way.

The truth is, we are all very fragile. Praise the Lord, we are not strong because we have hold of Him, but we are in the position of strength and security because of His hold on us! In Christ, nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39).

**Slide # 8**

All God asks is that we TRUST Him!

God help us to ever cling to the truth that YHWH is the God of our salvation!

This is the great enduring truth! Persevere on – the kingdom is coming!