

PSALMS

Chapter 88

I Cry Out Day and Night Before You

A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

O LORD, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you. 2 Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry! 3 For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. 4 I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, 5 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. 6 You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. 7 Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah* 8 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; 9 my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you. 10 Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? *Selah* 11 Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? 12 Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? 13 But I, O LORD, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. 14 O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? 15 Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. 16 Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. 17 They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. 18 You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.

Ps 88 A cry out of the depths, the prayer of one on the edge of death, whose whole life has been lived, as it were, in the near vicinity of the grave. So troubled have been his years that he seems to have known only the back of God's hand (God's "wrath," v. 7), and even those nearest him have withdrawn themselves as from one with an infectious skin disease (see v. 8). No expressions of hopeful expectation (as in most prayers of the Psalter) burst from these lips; the last word speaks of darkness as "my closest friend." And yet the prayer begins, "O LORD, the God who saves me." The psalm recalls the fact that although sometimes godly persons live lives of unremitting trouble (see 73:14), they can still grasp the hope that God is Savior. In its Hebrew structure, three four-line stanzas (vv. 3–5, 6–9a, 9b–12) are framed by two two-line prayers; to this is appended an additional four-line stanza in which the psalmist complains that his present distress is but characteristic of his whole troubled life. (CSB)

This is one of the most unusual psalms, both in its literary background and in its theme. It is the only psalm with a double heading (see information in title section below). The content of this psalm is also unusual in that the only spark of hope is in verse one, which refers to the God who saves. (PBC)

Ps 88 Personal psalm, prayed by someone whose suffering sounds a lot like Christ's own suffering. Lamenting the troubles that God has visited upon him (vv 7–8, 16, 18), the psalmist clings to the hope that God shall yet save him (v 1). Cyr Jer: "Christ speaks in the Prophets ... see how they show the exact point of the Hour, and of the Passion, and of the Resurrection?" (*NPNF* 2 7:96). *Song*. See Ps 46 intro. *Sons of Korah*. See Ps 42 intro. *choirmaster*. See p 993. *Mahalath*

Leannoth. May refer to the tune; see Ps 53 intro. *Maskil*. See p 841. *Ezrahite*. Possibly referring to a descendant of Zerah (1Ch 2:6), whose sons included Heman and Ethan (cf Ps 89 intro).

Format: Vv 1–2, appeal to God to hear; vv 3–7, depth of the pit; vv 8–12, questions about the grave; vv 13–18, suffering God’s terrors. (TLSB)

88 *Ezrahite*.† The reference appears to be to Zerah, one of Judah’s sons, who is recorded as having a Heman and an Ethan (see Ps 89 title) among his sons (see 1Ch 2:6). If so, the title here may represent the result of two traditions, arising from the similarity between these two Judahite names and those of two famous Korahite choir leaders, Heman and Ethan (Jeduthun). (CSB)

88:1–2 Opening appeal to the Lord as “the God who saves me.” (CSB)

88:1 *God of my salvation* – He addresses the Lord as “God of my salvation,” meaning God who delivers him, or at least is able to deliver him. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

day and night before You. Not necessarily a reference to continual worship in the temple, as in the case of Anna (Lk 2:36–37), but more likely a reference to continual prayer, as in 1Th 5:17. (TLSB)

88:3–5 Living on the brink of death. Whether the psalmist lies mortally ill or experiences some analogous trouble or peril cannot be known. (CSB)

88:3 *my soul is full of troubles*. This aptly summarizes this psalm. The danger of death, an awareness of God’s wrath, a failure to see any possible reason for his affliction and the loss of family and friends are among the woes that overwhelm him. (PBC)

88:4 *who as no strength* – One evidence of this is that he has lost his natural strength – he is like a strong man (s.v. Ps. 45:3) without strength. Whatever natural abilities and vigor he might have had has gone now. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

88:5 *remember no more*. From the perspective of this life, death cuts off from God’s care; there is no remembering by God of the needy sufferer to rescue and restore (see 25:7; 74:2; 106:4). In his dark mood the author portrays his situation in bleakest colors. (CSB)

Unbelievers under God’s judgment and abandonment. (TLSB)

88:6–9a You, O God, have done this! The psalmist knows no reason for it (see v. 14), but he knows God’s hand is in it (see Ru 1:20–21; Am 3:6). That his Savior-God shows him the face of wrath deepens his anguish and helplessness. But he does not try to resolve the dark enigma; he simply pleads his case—and it is to his Savior-God that he can appeal. (CSB)

88:6–7 Psalmist realizes that God has allowed this suffering (cf Jb 2). (TLSB)

88:7 *all your waves*. Powerful imagery for threatening forces or circumstances. This and related imagery are found in ancient Near Eastern creation myths. In many of these a primal mass of chaotic waters (their threatening and destructive forces were often depicted as a many-headed monster of the deep had to be subdued by the creator-god before he could fashion the world and/or rule as the divine king over the earth. Though in these myths the chaotic waters were subdued when the present world was created, they remained a constant threat to the security and well-being of the present order in the earth (the world in which man lives). Hence by association

they were linked with anything that in human experience endangered or troubled that order. They were also associated with the sea, whose angry waves seemed determined at times to engulf the land. Imagery drawn from sea and death, sometimes side by side, was used by OT poets to depict threats and distress.). (CSB)

Selah – Hebrew; untranslatable. Mainly in the first two books of Psalms. Probably refers to the accompaniment of the harps during the psalm. (TLSB p. 993)

This often occurs in the middle of a psalm and which apparently signals an interlude. “The Sela indicates that one must be still and quickly think through the words of the psalm; for they demand a quiet and restful soul, which can grasp and hold to that which the Holy Spirit there presents and offers” (Luther). (Psalms – The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer p. 23)

Selah may be a musical notation. It could also be a point where a pause is desirable for the singer or reader of the psalm in order that the statement last made or the thought as a whole just developed may be reflected upon before the next turn of the thought appears. (Leupold)

88:8 *my closest friends*. Abandonment by friends was a common experience at a time when God seemed to have withdrawn his favor. (CSB)

shun. Perhaps implying that the psalmist’s physical afflictions are such that his friends find it difficult to look at him. (TLSB)

His friends have shunned him. As a result, he is shut up in his place and cannot go out anywhere. The physical toll this has had on him is devastating. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

shut in. With no escape except that which God provides. (TLSB)

88:9 *spread out my hands*. Posture of prayer and supplication. (TLSB)

In the middle of verse 9 the focus of the psalmist changes to his praying for deliverance and the praise that such a deliverance would bring to God in the end. He begins by restating his vigilance in prayer: “I have called on you. O Lord, every day; I have stretched out my palms to you.” The intensity of his praying is reflected in the posture referred to. He probably sank to his knees and stretched out his hands upon the ground. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

88:9b–12 Appeal to God to help before the psalmist sinks into “the land of oblivion.” (CSB)

88:10–12 Not a reference to the resurrection, but rhetorical questions to God, essentially asking, “If You let me die, how will I be able to praise You?” (TLSB)

88:10, 12 *wonders*. God’s saving acts in behalf of his people. (CSB)

88:10 *rise up*. In the realm of the dead (not in the resurrection); see Isa 14:9. (CSB)

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88:11 *love ... faithfulness*. That is, love-and-faithfulness. (CSB)

Abaddon. Lit, “ruin”; Hbr name for the “angel of the bottomless pit” (Rv 9:11). Here, it is another reference to the pit (v 4) itself. (TLSB)

88:12 *land of forgetfulness*. Cf v 5. (TLSB)

88:13–14 Concluding prayer. (CSB)

88:14 Although God has not done these things, the psalmist feels lonely and abandoned, as if God truly has cast him away. (TLSB)

hide your face – Means that you refuse to show favor in accepting prayer. To him, even a glance from the God of life will lessen death’s sting. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

88:15–18 The psalmist has been no stranger to trouble; all his life he has suffered the terrors of God. (CSB)

Such despair is not necessary since the good and powerful God is still in control even when the situation looks dark. But God allowed such dark hours of his saints to be recorded in the Scriptures for our benefit. Though their faith was hanging on by a thread, God did not allow the thread to be broken. God does not break the bruised reed or snuff out the smoldering wick of faith (Matthew 12:20). He will bind up the broken reed and fan the faint spark of faith into a flame again. This psalm is written for our benefit, so that if we ever face times as dark as those of Heman, we will recognize that we are not unique in our anguish. (PBC)

88:15 *Your terrors*. The accusations of the Law terrorize sinners. “Contrition is the true terror of conscience, which feels that God is angry with sin and grieves that it has sinned” (Ap XIII 29). (TLSB)

helpless. Unable to defend against the righteous and accurate accusations of God’s Law. (TLSB)

88:16 *your wrath has swept over me* – All that he has is the overwhelming effect of affliction. It surrounds him like a flood every day. He feels defeated and isolated. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

88:18 *my beloved and my friend*. People closest to the psalmist. (TLSB)

my companions have become darkness. Psalmist cannot perceive the comforting presence and support of his friends and family. He feels alone. (TLSB)

Ps 88 This psalm evokes feelings of sadness and abandonment. The psalmist is so overcome by troubles that he wonders if God will hear him. Surely the loneliness spoken of here has been felt

by many suffering Christians! Yet even in sorrow and suffering, God inclines His ear (v 2) toward His people, always ready to hear and answer us according to His mercy. • Thank You, O Lord, that no matter how low I sink, I never disappear from Your sight. Amen. (TLSB)