

Heman the melancholy musician

Pre reading – Psalm 88 needs to be read in advance of this bible study.

Groups – The sheet at the end of this pack could be given to smaller groups of 3-4 people.

Introduction

Starter questions (5 mins)

- (1) What is the most common response to the question ‘how are you?’
- (2) Do you cover up when things are getting you down? How do you do this?

Psalm 88 was written by a man called Heman the Ezrahite. Heman means faithful. But as you will see Psalm 88 is a dark Psalm about suffering and sorrow. This session will discuss how to have Kingdom Courage in times of doubt and suffering, how to cope with the highs and lows of life, and how Jesus takes our darkness upon himself.

Heman

Who is this man? The main reference outside the Psalms is in 2 Chronicles. King David wanted to build a house for God, the temple. But God told him that it would be his son Solomon that would build a temple for Him, so the Israelites had been waiting excitedly for a long time for God to come and dwell in the city. We pick up the story on the day when the temple was finally finished, the ark of the covenant was brought into the temple, and it was laid in the Holy Place.

Read 2 Chronicles 5:11-14

*11 The priests then withdrew from the Holy Place. All the priests who were there had consecrated themselves, regardless of their divisions. 12 All the Levites who were musicians – Asaph, **Heman**, Jeduthun and their sons and relatives – stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen and playing cymbals, harps and lyres. They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets. 13 The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang:*

‘He is good; his love endures for ever.’

Then the temple of the Lord was filled with the cloud, 14 and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God.

Heman was a singer, he was one of the chief worship leaders in the temple, and he was there at the moment that the spirit of God came into the temple in power.

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) What was the response of the people to God coming to make a home with them?
- (2) How do we respond when we feel God close to us?
- (3) How do we respond when we don’t feel God close at hand?

Heman was a worship leader, wearing the finest linen (even 3,000 years ago worship leaders were the coolest people in church!). Heman had seen the glory of the Lord. He had the best of time and he felt close to God. Then imagine one day he stands up and sings another song, Psalm 88.

Read Psalm 88

A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah. For the director of music. According to mahalath leannoth. A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

- 1 Lord, you are the God who saves me;
day and night I cry out to you.
- 2 May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry.

- 3 I am overwhelmed with troubles
and my life draws near to death.
- 4 I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like one without strength.
- 5 I am set apart with the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
who are cut off from your care.

- 6 You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.
- 7 Your wrath lies heavily on me;
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.
- 8 You have taken from me my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them.
I am confined and cannot escape;
- 9 my eyes are dim with grief.

- I call to you, Lord, every day;
I spread out my hands to you.
- 10 Do you show your wonders to the dead?
Do their spirits rise up and praise you?
- 11 Is your love declared in the grave,
your faithfulness in Destruction?
- 12 Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

- 13 But I cry to you for help, Lord;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
- 14 Why, Lord, do you reject me
and hide your face from me?

- 15 From my youth I have suffered and been close to death;
I have borne your terrors and am in despair.
- 16 Your wrath has swept over me;
your terrors have destroyed me.
- 17 All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.
- 18 You have taken from me friend and neighbour –
darkness is my closest friend.

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) Do you relate to this psalm?
- (2) Which lines do you relate to the most?
- (3) Why do you think Heman would write a song like this?

Heman's Pain

What has caused Heman's pain? Why was he in such a bad place and no longer singing 'He is good; his love endures forever'? There are lots of theories: maybe the death of a child, maybe a disease like leprosy, or even something like depression that had constantly attacked him. In a way, it is good that we don't know, because this means this Psalm can talk into our specific situations even more.

In the Psalms, there are more songs of chaos than calm, more songs of worry than of worship. That is because the Psalms (and the Bible as a whole) are true to the nature of life. Heman is experiencing a gap between the goodness of God and the actual experience of God. Often we do feel close to God and on top of the world. But more often we feel disconnected for many reasons, of our own and of other people's doing.

Heman expresses how he feels due to this event. He feels overwhelmed, abandoned, and unheard. This is something we can all understand.

Suffering

The psalm says in verse 7.

Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.

This is a picture that many of us have experienced. The idea of waves battering against us, more and more bad things happening to us. Heman blames God for this. We all know that cry, when we blame God for not helping us, not bring us through. The truth about God's wrath is shown in Romans

Read Romans 1:18-23

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) Who is God's wrath being revealed against? (v18)
- (2) Which people are affected by this? (v19, v21)
- (3) Why is this just? (v20)

Suffering is brought about by living in a broken world, in a world disconnected from God. The effect of God's wrath lies on each us, and will affect our lives.

Suffering is something we all face, it doesn't generally mean you are being punished for something. Remember that Heman suffered, Paul suffered, and Jesus suffered.

Doubt

Read Psalm 88:13-14

*13 But I cry to you for help, Lord;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
14 Why, Lord, do you reject me
and hide your face from me?*

Heman sang in the temple 'He is good; his love endures for ever.' But now 'Lord why do you reject me?' It is like Jesus crying out 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Heman and Jesus cry out about a deep pain of disconnection from God.

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) Have you experienced times when you feel God is hiding his face from you?
- (2) How do you deal with times like that?

Expressing suffering and doubts

Imagine a worship leader at church suddenly leading us in a new song which was similar to Psalm 88. The song would end with the line 'Darkness is my closest friend'. Can you imagine the reaction? I can't imagine people would be happy. They would tell him or her to control themselves, and to sing a song with more hope.

The fact that Psalm 88 is God's Word doesn't sit easily with us, let alone the idea that we should thank God for it. But as you consider Heman's song, you do start to appreciate it more and more. Here we can learn a lot about how we must act in a situation that we all find ourselves in more often than we want to admit.

Response in suffering and doubt

Read Psalm 88:1-2

*1 Lord, you are the God who saves me;
day and night I cry out to you.
2 May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry.*

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) Even in pain where does Heman turn?
- (2) Where do we turn in times of suffering and doubt?
- (3) Practically, how do we express ourselves to God?

Be honest

Heman doesn't stop calling out to the Lord. Day and night. You get a picture of a small child, crying out over and over. You know that situation where the child falls in the playground. They cry out of pain and shock, sometimes completely irrationally. They cry and cry until their parent comes and picks them up. Is our cry like that in front of God?

Can we turn to God in our pain and be honest about our suffering and doubts? Heman shows us a picture of how to deal with suffering and doubt.

Seeing hope

Over half the psalms in the bible are a lament, like Psalm 88. This shows us something about the life we are to expect. Psalm 88 is also unique, it is the only lament that doesn't end with hope. It ends with the line 'Darkness is my only friend'.

Maybe the ending of 88 is a realistic one for life. The sad fact is, in this world, sometimes our prayers aren't answered with a 'Yes', for whatever reason. Life sometimes ends in pain and hopelessness. Darkness can often feel like our only friend.

But this isn't a great way to finish a Bible study!

Read Psalm 88:10-11

10 Do you show your wonders to the dead?

Do their spirits rise up and praise you?

*11 Is your love declared in the grave,
your faithfulness in Destruction?*

Heman can't understand how God's wonders can be shown when everything ends ultimately in death. Though he knows that God is good, he can't see it in his own life, because all he sees is destruction and death.

Group questions (5 mins)

(1) How does Jesus declare God's love 'in the grave'?

(2) How do these cries of hopelessness transform to questions of hope after Jesus?

With Jesus we believe that wonders can be shown even in the grave. In Jesus, we know that love can be, and is, declared even in death.

Hearts that sing 'Darkness is my only friend', can know the One who took darkness on Himself, and He is the only friend we need.

Ups and downs

So often we encourage each other to hide the feelings expressed in Psalm 88. We are encouraged to go back to singing 'The Lord is good, his love endures forever' and fake it until we make it.

Yet sometimes we need to sing these psalms of lament, because after we lament authentically before God, and later come through our time of lamentation, we will know even more that 'the Lord is good'.

We should not search out agony or even try to dwell in it. But we should embrace the momentary suffering, because it shows us a glimpse of what our saviour went through, it shows us what we have been saved from, and it makes our joy even more potent.

Response (15 minutes)

Pray for each member of the group.

You may consider praying into:

- Struggles and doubts in their lives
- Spirits of despair
- Transformation through the power of the cross.

Heman the melancholy musician – Group Handout

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- (1) What is the most common response to the question 'how are you?'
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2 Chronicles 5:11-14 (5 minutes)

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Psalm 88 (5 minutes)

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Romans 1:18-23 (5 minutes)

- (1) Who is God's wrath being revealed against? (v18)
- (2) Which people are affected by this? (v19, v21)
- (3) Why is this just? (v20)

Psalm 88:13-14 (5 minutes)

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- (2) How do you deal with times like that?

Psalm 88:1-2 (5 minutes)

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Group Questions - Psalm 88:10-11 (5 minutes)

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Response (15 minutes)

Pray for each member of the group.

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