



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 88

Bishop Youssef



Introduction

- The title of this Psalm is *A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah. To the Chief Musician. Set to "Mahalath Leannoth." A Contemplation of Heman the Ezrahite.*
- This Psalm is *A Song*, yet a remarkably sad song, and is often regarded as the saddest Psalm in the Holy Book of Psalms
- The *sons of Korah*, as it has been mentioned in previous Psalms, were Levites, from the family of Kohath and by David's time they served in the musical aspect of the temple worship (2 Chronicles 20:19)
- They served as temple gatekeepers (1 Chronicles 9:19,26:1,19), as well as bakers (1 Chronicles 9:31)



Introduction

- Korah led a rebellion of 250 community leaders against Moses during the wilderness days of the Exodus (Numbers 16)
- God judged Korah and his leaders and they all died, *“the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up together.”* (Numbers 16:32)
- But the sons of Korah remained, *“Nevertheless the children of Korah did not die.”* (Numbers 26:11) and their name came as the sons of Korah in ten Psalms
- *To the Chief Musician*, is thought by some to be the Lord God Himself, and others suppose him to be a leader of choirs or musicians in David’s time, such as Heman the singer or Asaph (1 Chronicles 6:33, 16:5-7, and 25:6)



Introduction

- *Set to “Mahalath”* seems to refer to the musical instrument upon which the song was composed
- The word *Mahalath* occurs also in the title of Psalm 53
- Some say it denotes a stringed instrument
- Others believe it to refer to the tune of the song
- While still others translate it as “Chief” or a “Band leader”
- Some translate it as (our maladies or disease)
- Disease because a form of the word almost identical occurs in Exodus 15:26; Proverbs 18:14; 2 Chronicles 21:15



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- And it points here to the spiritual malady with which all mankind are infected
- They believe that it refers to the malady of sin, and the weakness it causes
- According to St. Augustine it means pain
- He says, “For Maeleth,’ as we find in interpretations of Hebrew names, seems to say, For one travailing, or in pain.”
- This Psalm is one of the thirteen Psalms called *A Contemplation*,
- The author and singer of this Psalm is *Heman the Ezrahite*,
- *Heman* is from the tribe of Judah



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- Most commentators agree that he is the man alluded to in 1 King 4:31, as the brother of Ethan, and one of the five sons of Zerah (1 Chronicles 2:6), the son of Judah, and hence called *Ezrahite*
- He was noted for his great wisdom, (1 Kings 4:31); His musical ability and service as a leader of the Temple music (1 Chronicles 6:33,15:17-19,16:41-42,25:1; 2 Chronicles 5:12,35:15)
- Nothing is known of the occasion on which the Psalm was composed, except, as is probably indicated in the title, that it was in a time of sickness
- And from the Psalm itself we find that it was when the mind was covered and overwhelmed with darkness, with no comfort



Introduction

- The Psalm reveal the honest, intense emotions as he talks to God about his severe suffering
- The psalmist is describing his own personal experience and does not speak in the name of the nation
- This Psalm does not conclude with praise and thanksgiving or comfort and joy, but, from the beginning to the end, it expresses anguish, grief, and sadness
- Many believe it is a prophecy about the passion and suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ



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Psalm Outline:

- The Psalmist Severe Suffering 88:1-9
- A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- In the midst of great despair and lack of understanding concerning what is happening, the psalmist still goes to God in faith, *God of my salvation*
- The psalmist personalizes his relationship with God by referring to Him as *God of my salvation*
- And by addressing God thus, the psalmist also wishes to persuade God to act as the God of his salvation
- He asks God to listen to his cry as he prays to Him
- The opening verse would lead us to expect a much more hopeful Psalm

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- When the psalmist begins by praising God as the *God of my salvation*, we expect that he experienced that rescue, that deliverance in the moment
- This was not the case
- This description *my salvation* was both in past remembrance and holding on to a future hope
- From the experience the psalmist had had of the Lord's working salvation for him in times past, he is encouraged to hope that God would appear for him, and help him out of his present distress

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

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- But *God of my salvation* was the only beam of light in an otherwise dark Psalm
- He had, as yet, obtained no answer, and he now pours out, and records, a more earnest petition to God
- *I have cried out day and night*, Prayer being expressed by crying shows that the person is in distress and shows that it was vocal prayer and it was without ceasing
- St. Augustine comments on verse 1 and says, “Let us therefore now hear the voice of Christ singing before us in prophecy, to whom His own choir should respond either in imitation, or in thanksgiving.”

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- *Let my prayer come before You, The prayer was passionate cried out and constant day and night*
- The psalmist was desperate for God to bend toward him to hear and answer his prayer
- *before You, Not before men, but before the Lord*
- Let not my prayer be shut out, but be admitted; and let it come to You with acceptance
- In his grief, he wishes to feel that he is standing before the Lord, and in His presence; as though, God is only preoccupied with listening to him

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- The agony was not superficial; it went down deep to the soul
- It was inward in the *soul* and outward, threatening his physical life *my life draws near to the grave*, he was about to die
- *For my soul is full of troubles*, He pleads the urgency of his need as the ground for a hearing
- The suffering expressed by the psalmist are close in spirit to those of Psalm 22
- The word *full* means properly to satisfy as with food; when as much had been taken as could be
- So, he says here, that this trouble was as great as he could bear; he could sustain no more

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- This may be truly applied to Christ, who Himself said, when in the garden, "*My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death.*" (Matthew 26:38)
- St. Jerome believes that the psalmist, here, describes what the Lord Christ endured on the cross; as He carried the sins of the whole world, then descended to the pit to liberate the captives
- He *draws near* to it, but it was impossible for the pit to take hold of Him, He is without sin
- St. Augustine says, "Why therefore should we not say that the Soul of Christ was full of the evils of humanity, though not of human sins? Another Prophet says of Him, that He grieved for us."

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

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- The psalmist was so weak and afflicted that he felt, and others regarded him, as practically dead already
- He is regarded as a dying man, so near to death that he may be considered already as among the dead
- He was accounted as worthy of death
- And thus, Christ was considered and accounted of by the Jews
- The Sanhedrim counted Him worthy of death and the common people cried out Crucify Him
- The psalmist says that death seemed to pull on him as he was passively *adrift* and *like the slain*

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- Both the fourth and fifth verses seem to allude to a field of battle: the slain and the wounded, are found scattered over the plain
- He is like those who are thrown into a pit dug on a battlefield, among whom there are often some who appear to be mortally wounded, and cannot recover, and are so weak as not to be able to resist
- He thought himself quite neglected, of whom there was no more care and notice taken than of a dead man
- The psalmist dreaded death, fearing that it would mean being cut off not only from earthly relationships, but also from his relationship with God

The Psalmist Severe Suffering 88:1-9



- *who are cut off from Your hand, by the hand of God, in a judicial way*
- So, Christ in His death was like one of these, He was cut off in a judicial way, not for His own sins, but for the transgressions of His people, Isaiah 53:8
- In the Septuagint version, this verse came as: *I became free among the dead*
- This has been applied by the fathers to our Lord's voluntary death
- Everyone is obliged to die, He alone gave up His life, and could take it again, John 10:18

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- He went into the grave and came out when He chose
- The dead are bound in the grave; He was free, and not obliged to continue in that state as they were
- St. Jerome comments on verse 5 and says, “He did well by saying ‘like’ the slain”. He received the wounds for the sake of the salvation of humanity; according to the words of Isaiah: ‘He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows’” (Isaiah 53: 4).”
- And St. Cyril of Jerusalem says, “Although He was called ‘dead’, yet not like those dead who lie in hell; He was the only One free among the dead.”

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

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- *You have laid me in the lowest pit*, The psalmist now acknowledges more distinctly, that whatever adversities he endured proceeded from the Divine hand
- God is treating him as though he was actually dead
- *in the depths*, The allusion is to a dark and deep pit, under ground
- All these expressions are intended to convey the idea that he was near the grave; that there was no hope for him; that he must die
- Perhaps also it is connected with this the idea of trouble, of anguish, of sorrow; of that mental darkness of which the grave was an image

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- The whole scene was a sad one, and he was overwhelmed with grief, and saw only the prospect of continued sorrow and darkness
- St. Augustine says, “They laid Me in the lowest pit’, that is, the deepest pit. For so it is in the Greek. But what is the lowest pit, but the deepest woe, than which there is none more deep? Whence in another Psalm it is said, “You brought me out also of the pit of misery.’ ‘In a place of darkness, and in the shadow of death,’ whiles they knew not what they did, they laid Him there, thus deeming of Him.”

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- Here the cause of all the psalmist's sufferings is touched; *God was angry with him*
- The source of the affliction was the righteous *wrath* of God
- The psalmist had a deep sense of his own sinfulness
- Even as he felt himself sinking under *all Your waves*, he did not protest that God's wrath was unfair
- The afflictions of God's people are compared to *waves* of the sea, which are many, and come one after another, and threaten to overwhelm and sink, and so was the sufferings of Christ

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- Afflictions are often compared to waters in Scripture
- Christ's sorrows and sufferings are very appropriately signified by deep waters and overflowing floods, “*For the waters have come up to my neck.*” (Psalm 69:1)
- No wonder it was said of Jesus before He went to the cross, *He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed* (Matthew 26:37)
- These were brought upon Him by the Lord
- He did not spare Him; He laid all the punishment due to the sins of His people, on Him

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

88:1-9



- He caused every wave to come upon Him, and Him to endure all sorrows and sufferings the law and justice of God could require
- St. Augustine says, “There He came by Himself; suffered the waves of the shouts of men, saying: ‘Crucify Him, crucify Him!’; and with the increasing violence of the storm, He went down to the depths of the sea. The Lord endured suffering on the hands of the Jews”
- *Selah*, There was need to pause in order to contemplate of the significance of Christ passion and suffering for our salvation
- *You have put away my acquaintances*, In his affliction, his former friends wanted nothing to do with him

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

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- This also was seen as God's doing
- This is similar to what happened to Job, as his friends did not understand him
- Our Lord's suffering on earth was such that His own disciples forsook Him
- According to St. Augustine it means His disciples who ran away and did not even attend His trial
- Or, the psalmist probably means, although they were His acquaintances, they considered Him only as a man, not as God

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

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- He says, “Or shall we give these word a deeper meaning: that, by saying ‘You have put away’, he means: You kept My true identity hidden from My acquaintances; You did not reveal it to them.”
(St. Augustine)
- *an abomination to them*, It may mean that the Psalmist's affliction was of a kind which made him *unclean*
- Some literally understand it of the psalmist being in a prison, or dungeon, in the time of the captivity
- And some understood it of some bodily disease, by which he was detained a prisoner at home

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

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- *I cannot get out*, Perhaps worst of all, the psalmist felt that there was no escape
- Life was diminishing from him and if God did not respond, there seemed to be no remedy
- *My eye wastes away*, Literally, his eye decays or fails, indicating exhaustion, “*My eyes pour out tears to God.*” (Job 16:20)
- The psalmist reminded God of his constant prayer, made in the familiar posture of *stretched out* hands to God
- He has prayed earnestly and long, even though he received no answer

The Psalmist Severe Suffering

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- His whole body participated in prayers, his eyes wept, his voice cried, his hands were *stretched out*, and his heart broke, *of affliction*
- Nothing can make a true believer cease praying
- Christ, in His troubles in the garden, and on the cross, prayed for Himself, for divine support and assistance, as man; for His friends, disciples, and apostles, and for all that should believe in Him through them; and even for His enemies

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- By these words the psalmist implies, that if God did not make haste to rescue him, it would be too late
- He is so close to death; therefore, this was the critical point, God has to be quick to help him, there may not be another opportunity to save him
- He has prayed that God will show him His marvelous lovingkindness, but he will soon be beyond the reach of it, because from his point of view there is only one answer to the question, and that is a negative one
- So, in despair he asks; *Will You work wonders for the dead?*

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- The psalmist cannot believe that God will work such a miracle that the dead shall arise and praise Him
- He is wondering, “Am I to receive no mercy till I am dead?”
- And then will You work a miracle for my restoration and deliverance?
- Shall these, the dead, suddenly rise up and worship and praise God?
- The psalmist does not, any more than Job (Job 14:14), expect such a resurrection

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- He asks how long God meant to delay, — did He mean to do so till death intervened, that He might raise the dead by a miracle?
- In his view those in the grave cannot contemplate the character and the greatness of God
- He urges this as a reason why he should be rescued
- We reproach God's power if we do not believe that it is as easy for Him to restore life to the dead as to prevent, in proper season, the extreme danger
- Spiritually speaking, those who spiritually dead by their lack of faith and believe may not experience the wonders of God

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- St. Augustine says, “If we suppose this relates to those whose flesh life has left, great wonders have been wrought among the dead, inasmuch as some of them have revived: and in our Lord’s descent into Hell, and His ascent as the conqueror of death, a great wonder was wrought among the dead. He refers then in these words, ‘ *Will You work wonders for the dead?*’ to men so dead in heart, that such great works of Christ could not rouse them to the life of faith: for he does not say that wonders are not shown to them because they see them not, but because they do not profit them... Those then are dead, to whom wonders have not been shown, not because they saw them not, but since they lived not again through them.”

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- He ends verse 10 by *Selah* to meditate on life and death
- To proclaim God's *lovingkindness* and *faithfulness* is the delight of His people (Psalm 40:10,92:2), but in the grave they will neither have cause nor power to do it
- The psalmist pursues the same sentiment which he had previously stated
- Shall anyone make God's *lovingkindness* known there in the grave?
- It is a more appropriate and suitable time to rescue men, whilst in the midst of danger they are, than to raise them up from their graves when they are dead

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- He is wondering how in the place where *destruction* seems to reign; where human hopes perish; and where the body decays back to dust that anyone dwell there can honor God?
- When God delivers His servants, He confirms His faithfulness to His promises
- And also, God's *wonders* will not even be known in *darkness*, nor His *righteousness*, His faithfulness to His covenant in the land of *forgetfulness*; where men neither remember God nor are remembered by Him (Psalm 88:5)
- Where the memory has decayed, and where the remembrance of former things is unclear and insignificant

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- The psalmist returns from the somewhat vague speculations of verses 10-12 to himself
- He is not yet a mere shade, an inhabitant of the grave; he is in the flesh, and he can still cry to God
- So, after a brief focus on the terror and uncertainty of the grave, he once again set his focus on the Lord
- He contrasts himself with the dead, whose covenant relation with God is at an end
- He at least can still pray, and in spite of all discouragement will not cease to pray

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- He implies that his sufferings in long continued miseries was not because of his own laziness, as if he had not sought God
- Prayer is the first thing in the morning he would do
- Also *in the morning*, signifying, he would pray to Him very early, which is expressive of his eagerness, passion, and persistence
- It signifies a sense he had of his need of divine help
- So, Christ rose early in the morning, to pray, “*Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed.*” (Mark 1:35)

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- The sad idea from earlier in the Psalm is repeated in verse 14
- The worst of the psalmist's pain and suffering was the sense that God had in some way forsaken him, that his *soul* was *cast off* from God was no more under His care
- The psalmist does not proudly enter into debate with God, but mournfully desires some remedy to his miseries and troubles
- In the time of affliction, the one who suffers often feels as though God has cast him off; and hid His face from him so as not to hear his cry
- How often are good people want to ask this question

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- How often does this language express exactly what is passing in their minds
- How difficult it is to see why God who has all power, and who is infinitely benevolent, does not intervene to deliver His people in affliction
- This may be applied to Christ, when His soul was exceeding sorrowful unto death, and particularly when He was forsaken by His Father, (Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1)
- The psalmist is so *afflicted* - so crushed with sorrow and trouble - that his strength is nearly gone, and can no longer endure it, he is *ready to die*

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- His suffering has been for a long time, *from my youth*
- His whole life has been a life of trouble and sorrow
- His affliction had now lasted so long that he could hardly remember when it started
- It seemed to him as if he had been at death's door ever since he was a child, (which might be an exaggeration)
- If we apply this to the Messiah, He was afflicted both with the tongues and hands of men, by words, by strikes, and by the temptations of Satan; He was smitten and afflicted

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- In the midst of intense anguish, man may often forget the multitudes of God's goodness and complain as though there is nothing in his life since his youth but terrors and troubles
- *I am distraught*, the psalmist thoughts were distracted and confused, and his mind disturbed with the terrors of God upon him
- He was unable to collect his thoughts, he was so tossed about that he could not judge his own condition in a calm and rational manner
- Concerning the non-believer, it is written: "*The wrath of God abides on him*" (John 3: 36); God's terrors may cause the weak believer to *be distraught*

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- Continuing the thought from the previous verse, the psalmist understood that in some way God was the source of his present affliction
- If he suffered terrors, he could say to God they were *Your terrors*
- *fierce wrath*, It is intensive, expressing the hopeless and continued state of his suffering
- Even in his affliction, the psalmist believed in God
- This was a crisis, but it was a crisis of *faith*, not of unbelief
- *God's wraths and terrors*, of which he speaks in verse 16, were not of short continuance

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- He expresses them in verse 17 as having encompassed him *all day long*
- His troubles seemed to be like the waves of the sea constantly breaking on the shore
- *They engulfed me*, The psalmist felt overwhelmed, as if he were about to drown in his misery
- His troubles did not come one by one, so that he could meet them one at a time, but they all came upon him together at once
- According to St. Jerome, the Pharisees and the priests, together with Pilate, and the common people *engulfed Christ altogether*

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- The Psalm here ends, with no answer but a continued cry to God, who alone can rescue from such distress and despair
- This is mentioned in verse 8, and is here repeated to show that this was a most aggravating circumstance of his affliction
- This must be a very uncomfortable situation, to be in distress, whether of body or mind, and to have no kind friend near to at least help, relief, and comfort
- This sad psalmist ends the Psalm with no answer, with no ray of light, yet believing in the fact of God's love though he can only see the signs of His wrath

A Prayer for Mercy and Deliverance 88:10-18



- He appealed, like Job, to God, though God seems utterly harsh to him; assured that if he has any hope at all, it is in God alone
- So, did Christ's disciples and His friends, whom He loved
- They all forsook Him and fled when He was taken by His enemies, Matthew 26:56
- The Lord Jesus knew the meaning of this as He suffered
- In dreadful loneliness He trod the wine press, and all His garments were distained, *"Who is this who comes from Edom With dyed garments... I have trodden the winepress alone, And from the peoples no one was with Me."* (Isaiah 63:1-2)

Discussion



- What is the overall character and attitude of this Psalm?
- How is the psalmist's situation described?
- How was he treated by his friends? When?
- What imagery is used to describe death and the grave?
- What imagery did the psalmist use to describe God's wrath?



Discussion

- Why do you think people sometimes blame God for their problems?
- How does this Psalm help us?
- According to this Psalm, how can we respond to dark times?
- In what ways could this Psalm reflect the testimony of Jesus on the cross?