

# “How to Cry”

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**Series:** *Psalms*

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## **Christ Presbyterian Church**

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If you have a Bible, you can be turning to Psalm 88. If you don't have a Bible, it's written in your worship guide for you. If you were at Fun Camp this week, and you're new here, welcome. I see all the t-shirts. Everybody's looking festive. My joke this week as I'm preparing Psalm 88 and Fun Camp is happening is, well, I get to be the one that says Fun Camp is over, right? So that's kind of where we're at. You'll see why as we go through this particular Psalm. We are spending time looking at some Psalms this summer. Last week, we looked at one that had the vantage point of being reflective, of looking back at a time of suffering and how God showed up and delivered them. And it's nice to be able to look back and to step away from it and to see God's mercy and evaluate it. It's possible that if you were here, you thought, that's nice. What about when you're in the middle of it? What about when you're just suffering and you don't have any perspective? And you have no idea how it's going to end, if it's going to end, if there's any resolution, if there's any help, what do you do in that? Well, let's read the darkest Psalm in the Bible and realize that this is God's word for us too.

*A song, a Psalm of the sons of Korah to the choir master, according to Mahaloth Leonoth, a maskle of Heman, the Ezraite. O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you. Let my prayer come before you. Incline your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of troubles and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the pit. I am a man who has no strength, 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. You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me and you overwhelm me with all your waves. You have caused my companions to shun me. You have made me an abomination to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape. My eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O Lord. I spread out my hands to you. Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? Is your steadfast love declared in the grave or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But I, O Lord, cry to you. In the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors. I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me. Your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long. They close in on me*

*together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me. My companions have become darkness.*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

*Lord, we ask now for your great help as we look at a part of your word that when we suffer rings so incredibly true to life. This part of your word that does give us hope even when things feel hopeless, we ask now that by your Spirit's power we would we would hear your word clearly and understand it and that you would help me to be clear and faithful, Lord Jesus, that we even here would see you and trust you. We pray in your name. Amen.*

I can't decide if this is a southern phrase or an American phrase, but you've probably heard it. I've used it. You might have used it too. Anybody ever come to you and say, this too shall pass? If they did, they gave you that line when you were in the middle of, you know, some kind of hard thing, some kind of trouble. I think I've heard it most often in the context of raising small children. When you can't sleep and you're exhausted and the older parents say to you, this too will pass and you kind of want to punch them a little bit, you know. So this is one of those phrases that is well intended. When I've said it, it was well intended. And it's also, it's true. It's a truism. This will pass. Yes, I know that. But it sure doesn't feel like it. And it might not pass in my lifetime. It's one of those statements that it's true and it's not really solving the problem. It's true and it's also telling me that I'm going to have to wait longer. And you know what Americans like to do more than anything is wait. We love it.

I want to say at the outset of this song that it's, it is about great suffering. You could hear it. And I don't, I know where some of you are right now, I don't know where all of you are. You could be at any number of spots in your life. You could be in a place where you hear this song and it just seems really timely. Might seem completely irrelevant. Might also seem just way too late to have helped you when you went through a period of darkness. Many have said this.

You're either just coming off of a period of suffering, you're in the middle of it, or you're headed toward it.

Which is, you know, a very Presbyterian way of looking at life. But it's also a true way of looking at life. As we look at this song, I think it would help you to take stock of where you're at. Let's just acknowledge it on the outset. And if everything's fine for you right now, I'm so glad. You will likely have suffering coming. So you should consider this as a song that's intended to prepare you now. For those of you who are in the middle of it, this will just ring true to life and will feel like it's given voice to your experience. For those of you who are on the back end of a season of suffering, I hope that this song will help you keep walking through the cleanup work that comes after a season of intensive suffering.

Caveats aside, this is a prayer without resolution, an in-process sort of prayer. And really all it tells us is that when all you can do is cry, cry out to the Lord.

What does that look like? Tell Him how you feel. Tell Him what you think. And wait with Him in the dark. So that's our three points if you want an outline. Let's talk about each.

If you're going to cry out to the Lord, you're going to have to tell him how you feel.

We'll come back to the first few verses in a minute because they're really the only hopeful verses in the entire psalm. The author of this psalm, the superscription says it's a man named Heman the Ezraite who was one of the official temple singers during the reign of David. He's in a dark place. And the only language that he can really come up with to articulate it is that he feels like he's dying. You can see that throughout the passage. Look at three through five. *His soul is full of troubles, but he says my life draws near to Sheol.* Probably know Sheol is a Hebrew word to describe the realm of the dead. Not really a specific place as much as sort of the opposite of what we say when we say yeah they're no longer among the living. Right? We're not saying that they're in this place called not the living. We're just saying that they're dead. That's Sheol in a sense.

Verse four he says *I'm counted among those who go down to the pit.* Verse six *you put me in the depths of the pit regions dark and deep.* And we don't store our food or supplies or even water in pits, but they did. It's the time before refrigeration they dug deep pits in the ground and that was used for storage. And throughout the Bible you see people end up in a pit stuck.

Throughout this sermon I'm gonna make mention of Joseph and Job and Jeremiah. Apparently if your name started with a J you suffered a lot in the Bible. Jesus, right? We're gonna talk about all of them. Joseph's brothers left him in a pit and they left him for dead. You're stuck in a pit you're left for dead. Jeremiah was left for dead in a pit during his ministry. Lest we miss the death language look at verse five he puts a fine point on it. *I'm like one set loose among the dead like the slain that lie in the grave like someone whom God remembers no more. I'm cut off from his hand.* We don't know anything about the source of his misery and suffering, but all he can say is that I'm dying. And most importantly that's what he tells God. I'm dying.

And the other thing that we could sum up here is that he also feels incredibly alone. Look at verse eight. *You, God, have caused my companions to shun me. You've made me an abomination to them.* Whatever's going on there's no one around to help him out. And his companions have shunned him. It sounds like there it's possible that there's a betrayal that's happened. Someone who was close to him is now is now just not just away geographically or with time but is cut off. He says the same thing in verse 18. *You've caused my beloved, that's even closer, and my friend to shun me.* So he feels totally isolated.

If you've suffered you know this. This is often the case. You go through something and sometimes it's just a situation of when you're going through something horrible people have no idea what to say to you. And without intent they just don't come near. And they just don't want to say something dumb but for you it feels like why do you hate me? I'm miserable and you're not even talking to me. I'm a pastor. I'm supposed to be the person that shows up and talks to people

when they're suffering. I do this too often where I don't know what to say. And so this distance creeps in. Sometimes it's that.

Sometimes people are just busy in the normal margins of human relationships. So you probably don't talk to some of your friends every single day, right? Well if you're in the middle of suffering and you feel like you're dying, a few days feels like a few years. And even within a few days you feel like why do my friends hate me? Why is nobody showing up into my life? Why do I feel so utterly alone? It's the experience of deep suffering to feel alone.

Job's wife in his suffering, speaking of betrayal, came up to him and instead of putting an arm on his shoulder and saying I'm with you, she said why don't you curse God and die? That's betrayal. So he's alone and then his friends show up and his friends say every dumb thing possible over and over for chapter after chapter after chapter. He suffers utterly alone.

Joseph is left in a pit and he's left in a jail and he just keeps finding himself alone.

Jesus himself on the cross, his disciples have scattered, his closest associates, the ones that don't leave are, multiple gospels tell us, watching from a distance. They're not close. He feels like he's dying and he feels like he's all alone and some of you have experienced deep grief, deep sorrow and you have said as much. You feel like you're dying and you feel like you're dying alone. Some of you felt a betrayal and the only thing that might be worse than an actual death is a betrayal which feels like a death that has no funeral and no closure and you're forced to walk through that death every single day at times. Many of you have felt alone. Sometimes it just felt that way. There were people around you but you know the interesting thing about grief is that nobody can carry that for you. Nobody can walk through it for you. You know if you have a problem at your house, I might be able to come over and help you fix that problem but when you are walking through a personal grief, somebody might be able to be there with you but they can't carry it for you. You have to deal with it yourself.

Others of you have been actually abandoned and alone and it was terrible and if you're in a place where all this sounds foreign, you haven't had this experience, again you should realize that this is this is coming at some point in your life. I'm sorry to tell you. You'll feel like you're dying and you don't feel like you have a friend in the world and here's the question. Can you tell God exactly how you feel? You have that kind of freedom. Is that okay? Not how we are supposed to feel. Not how we think he wants us to feel. My guess is that when we go through periods of suffering, we might come to him with hesitation or feeling a little bit of guilt like I'm not supposed to feel this way but I'm going to talk to you about it and kind of dress up my language and try to feel the way I'm supposed to feel or you just don't come to him at all because what could he do? What does he know? How could he help?

This is a psalm. This is part of God's word that shows us a better path, a better way. Go to him and tell him exactly what you feel and tell him with specificity and don't dress it up. If you feel like you're dying, say it. If you feel like you're isolated and alone, say it and if you're not sure how you feel but you know that you feel bad, just tell him that.

My wife and I, when we were newly married, periodically she would notice my mercurial temperament and she would say to me, hey, you're mad right now. Of course, you know my response. No, I'm not, he said angrily, and I would deny it and deny it for some reason. One day I realized, oh, I can just admit that. I can just, yeah, you're right. I am mad. I don't know why. Do you know why? I had to begin to own an emotion that I didn't want to own. It's a weird thing to do.

You don't have to lie to God about what you're feeling when you are in the darkness and you actually don't even have to be able to explain why you feel that way. You can just go and tell him. And if you're in the middle of suffering, I'm just gonna leave that with you and encourage you to go to him and be honest about how you feel and to trust that if you're in Christ, you have the freedom to groan and cry out and complain and be frustrated and be sad and to not be okay before him.

Let me say this. If you're not in the middle of suffering, if things are actually going well, how do you prepare for a hard season? Sometimes we hear about somebody who goes through an incredible difficulty and we think, I don't know how I would respond. Well, there are things to do to prepare. Could this song possibly push you to talk to God about how you feel now while things are fine? To learn to be honest with God about the small things, the little things, so that maybe when the big things happen, you'll actually have some practice and have that kind of freedom and honesty to go to him when the big things hit.

Why should you do that? Well, he actually knows how you feel anyway, first of all. He made you an emotional person and he actually also knows when your emotions are running away from you and you can't really catch them. And if you try to hide it, you're not really hiding it. And if you try to dress it up, he sees through all the dress up. So there's that.

And then there's just the fact that if you're in Christ, he actually loves you. He actually cares how you feel and he actually would like to hear from you. You have the freedom to bring him your feeling and trust that he's not going to turn you away. You can cry out to him. You have that freedom.

You also have the freedom to tell him what you think.

Now, for some of you, all this talk about emotions has been difficult so far. So I resonate. I hear you. Let's talk to you thinkers. Can you tell God how you think and what you think about him? Even if it doesn't square up with what you're supposed to think? Let's see.

This psalmist here in Psalm 88 probably objectively knows that the God of the covenant isn't pouring out actual judgment and condemnation on him. If he's a good Israelite, if he's in the temple and he's got some sense of who God is and how he operates, he could probably articulate the reasons why. But his in-the-moment, real, lived, experienced belief is this. God is clearly judging me and he tells God that. But look at verses 3 through 5. Those are I statements.

They give way to you statements in verses 6 through 8. You see that? *You, God, have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me. You overwhelm me with your waves.* You did this. You set your wrath against me. You unleash the flood of judgment with your waves. His lived and therefore actual theology, his lived and therefore actual theology is that he really believes that God is judging him and is pouring out his wrath on him. Look at verse 15. *I suffer your terrors, God. I'm helpless. Your wrath has swept over me.* Your dreadful assaults, wrath, flood, assaults.

It's a long way away from singing Jesus loves me to sing Psalm 88. It's raw. It's almost accusatory, isn't it? He's telling God, you're condemning me and I don't understand why and I'm kind of an emotional wreck about it and I'm just gonna tell you what I think is true. I think you're, I think you're judging me and I think you're against me. If you're a person who belongs in the covenant, you have all the theological reasons to know that God is for you. But he says, no, I think you might be against me. Notice verses eight and 18. He says, *God, you're the one who's caused my companions to shun me. Verse 14, God, you're the one who's cast my soul away and hiding your face from me.*

You know, sometimes we don't actually let ourselves say what we really believe is true out of a sense of we feel like we need to defend God somehow. I feel like we're not allowed to say those things. You'll note an entire absence of needing to try to defend God's honor in this Psalm. He's not trying. He doesn't care to do that because when you're in deep suffering, you can't worry about defending God's honor and good news is God doesn't need you to defend his honor. He can handle that for himself.

But if you are in deep suffering, you might just speak directly and clearly to him, especially about those places where what you are thinking and what you know to be true are clashing.

Look at verses 10 through 12. Here are the questions that he asked God. These are rhetorical questions. He, he professes that God is a God of wonders. He talks about him. *Do you work wonders?* He says it twice. He talks about God is worthy of praise and he gives steadfast love and faithfulness. He's a God of righteousness, but he's asking, if you kill me, is there any of that for me? Can I experience any of those great things, presumably that he's experienced in the past? If you end my life. This is a great example of how sorrow can break our thinking. Sometimes we start to think that God is against me. I'll never know his greatness again, his mercy to me. And he has the audacity to tell God that.

What do you do? When you actually think something that you know doesn't fit with what God says, you know that he says one thing, but genuinely, experientially, you deeply believe another. You know that his word says that he's good. And you just don't think he's good right now. You think he hates you and without cause.

What do you do with these moments of spiritual cognitive dissonance?

What do you do when your heart breaks your brain?

Is it okay to talk to God about that?

Or do we need to get our thinking straight before we come to him?

This Psalm seems to tell us that we have freedom to tell him what we actually think and to ask him for help. That's a critical point. When our professed theology doesn't fit what we're thinking at the moment, we can actually come and talk to him about that and ask him to show up.

This is the equivalent of the guy that came to Jesus and said, I believe, help my unbelief. Well, which one is it? Do you believe or are you filled with unbelief? Yes. Yes. Both are true. I believe I know what I'm supposed to believe. I know what's true, but I've got all of this unbelief. You're going to have to help me do something.

We have that freedom if we're in Christ.

To believe the gospel and know that there's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and to come to God and to say, I'm struggling to believe that you actually clothed me in your righteousness. I don't feel very clothed and covered and able to come before you right now.

To agree and know in our minds that God is sovereign and then to tell him, it's really difficult for me to believe that you're still good because I am suffering and I don't know why you're allowing this to happen.

To say, along with the Heidelberg catechism about God's providence, to say, I believe that God upholds heaven and earth and all creatures and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty. Indeed, all things come not by chance but by his fatherly hand. And then to tell him, I'm really having trouble believing that your hand is fatherly right now because I'm so incredibly miserable.

Can you talk to him like that?

If you do, you might find yourself in some good company.

Joseph professed what people meant for evil, God meant for good, after all of it was resolved. He did not say that in the bottom of the pit or when he had been unjustly accused and slammed into the bottom of the prison.

Job refused to curse God, but he lashed out and he all but accused God of doing wrong until God met him in the end in the whirlwind and set things right again.

We can bring him what we believe when we know it doesn't fit what he says. Suffering can make our thoughts go a little wild, but God can handle wild thoughts. Just like when our kids come to us and they're saying something that we, they know better, we know better. They're just all spun

up right now. What do we do? Do we tell them now, get out of this room until you get everything right and you're thinking, you get out of here and then you come back and you tell me what you think. No, you meet them in the middle of that. You show them mercy.

Tell them what you think. Not so you can keep thinking in ways that are dissonant with the Bible, but where else will you go? Who else has the words of life? God has the ability to help us, but we will have to tell him. This psalm does not end with a bow or things getting fixed. Which means at the end of this prayer, the guy who's writing it is going to have to wait, but he doesn't wait alone in the dark and neither do we. That's the last point here.

We wait with God in the dark.

It's good for us to acknowledge the darkness. That's the last sentence in verse 18. He also mentions it in verse six. He says, *my companions have become darkness*. Another translation says darkness is my only companion. Either way, you don't have to think too hard to realize he's by himself and it's dark and there's no turn. And he acknowledges it. God seems to have turned away. He feels like he's dying. He's alone. I've heard many of you who have dealt with things like depression use this kind of language. It's darkness. That your brain feels dark. You turn dark. God went dark. Your friends went AWOL. Your family was no help and you felt hung out to dry.

There's a hymn written by Ann Steele called Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul where she is essentially trying to figure out, can I approach God when I am miserable and sorrowful? Do I have access to him in those moments? And she has this line toward the end where she says, may I ever find access to God? And this is the line, to breathe my sorrows there. That's a great way to put it.

Ever been around somebody who is suffering deeply? There's a physiological thing that happens. They sometimes they can't stop sighing. What is that? I don't know that I can explain it to you, but to breathe your sorrows is certainly physiological, but it's more than that. Can you breathe your sorrows in a desperate prayer to the God who seems like he's cast you off and who has brought this calamity on you? Isn't that a strange thing? Why would we ever do that? Why would we breathe our sorrows to God who seems to be causing them and is staying silent about them?

Back to verses one and two. *Oh Yahweh, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you. Let my prayer come before you. Incline your ear to my cry, God of my salvation. Incline your ear, hear my cry.* That's how he starts. It's not where he ends, but it's how he starts. That God is not just God. He is the God of my salvation, and that he inclines his ear to me. They knew times when God came to save them as Israelites. We know more than they did. We can understand the phrase God of my salvation in deeper and better ways than they could. Here's a little experiment for you with the Psalms. Imagine Psalm 88 on the lips of Jesus, and it certainly was. He would have sang all the Psalms as a perfect Israelite. He would have known them deeply. He is God the Son, and so he's the author. There's a reason why we sang some Good Friday hymns today. Jesus singing this psalm is fundamentally different than us singing it. When he sings, my life draws near to Sheol. His life did draw near to Sheol. He knew it, and he told them. On the

cross, he was a man who had no strength, verse four. When he cried out about being forsaken in his humanity, he actually was cut off from the Father's hand. The Father's wrath really did lie heavily upon him. His companions really did shun him. People wagged their heads at him and mocked and spat upon him, and he was shut in, and he couldn't escape, and he asked for another way in the garden, and in deep anguish and sorrow and a physiological reaction, his sweat turning to blood, he obeyed the Father's plan willingly. And on the cross, the Father's face was hidden from him. He told the mob who arrested him that this was their hour and the power of darkness. And the Lord Jesus, the God-man, died under the righteous, wrath-bearing, the righteous, overwhelming wrath of God in the dark. A couple of things that that means for us.

When you suffer, he knows what it feels like.

He is sympathetic to sufferers. He knows betrayal better than we do. He knows misery and pain better than we do. He knows, he knows death better than we do. And when he is with you in it, you have a God and a Savior who is actually sympathetic, not with meaningless phrases, but he knows.

But there's another sense in which his suffering is nothing like yours, and your suffering is nothing like his. His is worse, worse, and he accomplished something for you. Think about the cross. He underwent isolation and misery and darkness and the horror of the wrath of God so that there is a darkness that you will never know. Ever.

Because the Father turned away from him, he'll never turn away from you.

Because he took the penalty of the law for you, you'll never die with the penalty of the law against you if you're in Christ, which means he can sympathize, and he actually can lead you out.

How do I know that? How can we say that? There's an answer to the questions from verse 10. God does, in fact, work wonders for the dead. The departed do rise up to praise him. His wonders are known in the darkness, and on the third day, his wonders were known in the darkness. And the Lord Jesus rose from the dead and promised that he will return and raise us up and we'll never die again, and all the darkness will be over.

He knows darkness. He was raised to be with us in it, and he promises to lead us out of it.

And brothers and sisters, if this isn't true, there's no hope for us in our suffering. If this is, if what, if the gospel about Jesus isn't true, there's no God of salvation that's coming to help you. And I would say that to you if you're here and you're not yet a Christian or you're wrestling with the gospel. There's no other way to bear up under the suffering that is certain to come into your life than to call on the Lord Jesus, believe that he is, who he says he is, and to trust him come what may. He has been believed upon by nations throughout history. People and cultures have been changed as a result, and people have walked through horrible, horrible things, clinging to a scrap of faith in the living God and trusting that he will come and turn the lights back on. He's with you, and he's for you. Wait in the dark with him.

I'll close with this. Some of you may know the name Andrew Brunson, the Presbyterian pastor who was imprisoned in Turkey roughly 2016 to 2018. That's a dark night of the soul. I think we can all agree, having to live in a Turkish prison for a few years, certain that you're gonna die, certain of that. After his release, he wrote a memoir of his experience. I have not read it, full disclosure, but one of you has and shared this quote with me. He says this;

“Maybe God chose a weak man to serve as an encouragement to others who feel weak. I understand persecution, yet I was unprepared for what happened to me. In part, this is because I counted the cost for some things, but never for prison. I don't know of any other missionary who's been imprisoned in Turkey, but what really broke me was unmet expectations. I expected that God would intervene to carry me above my circumstances into joy, and that even in grief, I would feel strength, an infusion of grace, and most importantly, that I would have a sense of his presence. Instead, I felt abandoned by God.

The truth is God's faithfulness, loyalty, and love are never put to the test in our difficulties. It was my faithfulness, my loyalty, my love for him that was being tested.”

That's us in Psalm 88. Will we keep trusting him and trying to be faithful and loving him when it's still dark and he's testing us and he's calling us, calling you to walk through darkness? Well, will you tell him how you feel? Will you tell him what you think? You're free to do both, and you're free to wrestle, but you can wait with him in the dark because he went into it first, and he will lead you out. Maybe we could say it this way. In Jesus Christ, the God of your salvation, this too will pass. Wait and see. Let's pray together.

*We ask, Lord, for those who are suffering today that you would let them know your presence as they sit in the dark. Remind them of the Lord Jesus who underwent your wrath. Assure them that there is no wrath falling on their heads and that whatever mystery of your providence you were asking them to walk through, they can trust that you are with them and that you'll lead them through. For those who were trying to process previous sufferings, Lord, give them the grace that they need to keep trusting you, to keep coming to you. For those who have not suffered much and certainly will at some point, Lord, would you teach us all how to come to you with honesty, to bring our thoughts of you to you and to your word, and to trust that you have the words of life, and you can correct us, and to trust that we can actually rest, even when we don't understand what you're doing. Thank you for your love for us. That is guaranteed not because of how we feel today, but because of the life, death, and resurrection of your son, Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen*