Psalm 88


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 neighbor—darkness is my closest friend.

Context:

This is a Psalm of individual lament or complaint against God. While the thought of complaining to God is foreign to us in our current culture, we must remember that the Bible is an ancient text and this was actually a common type of address toward God. The remarkable thing is that not people would dare complain against God (I think if we are honest, all of us have complaints against God) but rather, what is remarkable is that God, allows, invites, and listens to our complaints.

Something else we must understand is that the original audience (Ancient Israel) viewed God’s power and goodness as directly tied to their obedience. They had entered a contract where IF they obeyed God THEN He would bless them with food, families, land, wealth, and victory over their enemies. If they did not receive these blessings it meant that they were in sin or that God was not upholding His end of the bargain (see Deuteronomy 28). This understanding is vital because it explains why the people would complain against God. Therefore, lament psalms (or complaint psalms) allowed the people to call into question if God was upholding His end of the covenant.

Finally, just as we have certain types of literature today that have certain elements and should be read certain ways (think of reading “The Onion” vs
reading a science textbook) so also lament psalms had certain elements and were to be read in certain ways. Not every element is present in every psalm of lament but it is helpful to know some of the basic elements:

1) **Direct Address** to God
2) A **Complaint** describing the occasion for the lament
3) A **Petition** for God to rectify the situation (make it right)
4) A **Statement of Trust** in God’s proclivity to save and vindicate
5) a **Vow** to offer public thanksgiving after God has intervened favorably (often absent in communal Psalms)

Please read Psalm 88 with your group out loud and discuss some initial observations....

**Commentary:**

1 - The Psalmist directly addresses God and cries out to Him

2-4 - The prayer is one of anguish because of the greatness of the distress

5-6 - This has brought the sufferer near to death

7-8 - And he claims the suffering is the result of God’s wrath.

9-13 - The Psalmist appeals to God’s reputation by asking a series of questions which function as requests for God’s help

14-15 - Now the question which bothers the Psalmist the most, “Why would God turn away from Him amidst his prayers for help?”

16-18 - Finally, a return to sorrow, grief, and lamentations before ending the Psalm in darkness.
Psalm 88 is often referred to as the darkest psalm in the Bible because there is no direct mention of trust in Yahweh for deliverance. But Psalms such as this one, despite being accusatory of Yahweh, actually express faith in Him by directing concerns to him. The accusations of Yahweh do not necessarily accurately depict Yahweh’s character or His actual role in the psalmist’s life—instead, they express the emotion of the psalmist toward Yahweh. In this regard, psalms like this one show that Yahweh is willing to listen to any and all prayers directed faithfully to Him.