

Psalm 88

Prayer during the Day Tuesday Week 4
Night Prayer Friday

This is a cry from a person who is about to die (compare Psalm 39; Isaiah 38; Job 10). Shunned by friend and foe, and feeling utterly deserted by God, the psalmist is desperate. Note the absence of any confession of sin. Note, too, that there is no promise of thanks. It would seem that the psalmist holds little hope that his prayer will be answered favourably and that he will escape the clutches of death. Since death is the destiny of all, and since it is not the work of some rival God, he wonders if the final revelation of God is one of anger, chaos, fire and terror?

The title reads: 'A Song. A Psalm* of the Korahites*. To the leader: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil* of Heman the Ezrahite'. 'Mahalath' was mentioned in the title of Psalm 53. 'Leannoth' occurs only here. Heman merits frequent mention in the First Book of Chronicles:

These are the sons of Heman: Bukkiah, Mattaniah, Uzziel, Shebuel, and Jerimoth, Hananiah, Hanani, Eliathah, Giddalti, and Romamti-ezer, Joshbekashah, Mallothi, Hothir, Mahazioth. All these were the sons of Heman the king's seer, according to the promise of God to exalt him; for God had given Heman fourteen sons and three daughters. They were all under the direction of their father for the music in the house of YHWH with cymbals, harps, and lyres for the service of the house of God. Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman were under the order of the king.

– 1Chronicles 25:4-6

Though nothing can be done to save his life, the psalmist will die with prayer on his lips to this God whom he cannot understand.

¹YHWH*, my God, by day I plead for your help*; by night, I cry out in your presence.

²Let my prayer reach you; listen to my cry.

The psalmist give voice to his tragic situation.

³For my soul* is full of misfortune, and my life is on the brink of Sheol.

**⁴I am numbered among those who go down to the Pit. I sense that my time is up,
⁵that I am relegated among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off forever from your hand.**

The psalmist is dying

⁶You have put me down in the Pit, in the darkness of the Abyss.

⁷Your wrath* lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves.

⁸You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape;

⁹my eye grows dim with sorrow.

All day long I call on you, YHWH, straining my hands towards you.

¹⁰Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you?

¹¹Is your kindness* acknowledged in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

¹²Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help* in the land of forgetfulness?

According to his understanding, God controls all that happens, and so sees God as the one responsible for the situation in which he finds himself.

Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has touched me!

– Job 19:21

He reminds God of how he is always praying. He reminds God also of the futility of death, since he will no longer be able to give glory to God. Why, then, does God want him to die?

What profit is there in my death, in my going down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?

– Psalm 30:9

In the realm of death no one calls on you; in Sheol who can give you praise? I am exhausted with my groaning; all night long I drench my pillow with tears; I soak my couch with weeping.

– Psalm 6:5-6

The dead do not praise YHWH, nor do those who go down into silence.

– Psalm 115:17

Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.

– Isaiah 38:18

Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades in place of the living who give thanks? From the dead, as from one who does not exist, thanksgiving has ceased.

– Sirach 17:27-28

‘Abaddon’ (88:11) means ‘destruction’, and is a name for the realm of Death.

In spite of things making no sense the psalmist refuses to give up praying.

A deep and terrifying darkness descended upon Abram.

– Genesis 15:12

Terror and dread fell upon your people.

– Exodus 15:16

My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.

– Psalm 55:4-5

Withdraw your hand far from me, and do not let dread of you terrify me.

– Job 13:21

Heavy night was spread over them, an image of the darkness that was destined to receive them; but still heavier than darkness were they to themselves.

– Wisdom 17:21

God's first creation was light. God's last is darkness!

Without in any way romanticising death, the Resurrection does give a response to this cry.

Christ suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.

– 1Peter 3:18

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?

– 1Corinthians 15:54-55

¹³YHWH, I cry to you for help*; in the morning my plea will come before you.

¹⁴YHWH, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?

¹⁵I have been wretched and sickly since my youth, I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

¹⁶Your wrath* has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me.

¹⁷They surround me like a flood all day long; from all sides they close in on me.

¹⁸You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me; my only companion is darkness.