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### Overcoming the Darkness of the Six “D” Words Psalms 88 and 42

How many of you today here an echo in Heman of your own experience? How many of you can honestly say: “I know precisely and all too painfully how Heman felt. That’s how I feel too.”

I suspect that many of you are actually surprised to discover that a psalm like this is even in the Bible. For most of you, myself included, the psalms are a source of joy and delight in God. When I need encouragement and hope, I turn to the psalms. When I want to celebrate God in all of his glory and goodness, I turn to the psalms. We love the psalms because we can’t help but be swept up in the spiritual euphoria of praise and thanksgiving and confidence in God. But not Heman.

To read Psalm 88, perhaps for the first time, is for some of you oddly encouraging. I can almost hear you say: “Finally, someone who understands what I’m going through, someone who can identify with my misery and sadness and depression. At least now I’ve come across someone who can put into words the anxieties and fears and painful emotions that I’ve lived with for so long. Thank you, Heman.”

There’s no mistaking what Heman was describing. I like to think of it in terms of what I call the 6 “D” words: (1) doubt, (2) distress, (3) despondency, (4) disillusionment, (5) depression, and (6) despair. And if you’re wondering if there is a rationale behind the order in which I’ve listed them, the answer is yes. They describe *a progression in the human heart* that first begins with doubt, with wondering if God even cares, or whether he’s near enough to hear my cries.

Doubt in turn leads to distress. When doubt about God’s goodness and his presence is cured or overcome by the power of truth, we don’t go any farther in our experience of the six “D” words. Doubt is driven out by faith and renewed confidence in God. But for some of you, when doubt only intensifies it ultimately leads to distress. The doubts in our mind become emotionally painful and debilitating. The weight of both mental and emotional distress is almost more than a person can bear.

If the distress produced by doubt isn’t alleviated, if it is prolonged, it ends up in despondency. Despondency is characterized by the diminishing of hope in our hearts. We are despondent because we don’t see much hope for change, either now or in the future.

Despondency invariably leads to disillusionment. There is in disillusionment more than simply a loss of confidence and a cynicism about our relationship with God. There is in disillusionment a certain anger and bitterness. It’s more than sadness of soul. *With disillusionment the soul turns sour.* We find ourselves wondering if God even exists, and even if he does, he has no intentions of stepping into our lives and doing anything to alleviate the pain.

The fifth “D” word is one with which all too many people are familiar on a daily basis: depression. It’s the one word of our six that doesn’t even need definition. All who suffer from it know what it means. And of course, the final stage, represented by the sixth “D” word, is despair. Despair occurs when depression utterly consumes the soul. It is the complete loss of all hope and the shattering of all expectations. Despair is when the soul hits rock bottom. Despair settles in when we finally come to the conclusion that we’ve been lied to about God and the meaning of life. The fact is, there is no meaning. There is no purpose. There is no reason to breathe another breath or live another minute.

Some who read Psalm 88 conclude that Heman experienced all six of the “D” words, but I’m not so sure. As bad as the psalm sounds, I’m not prepared to conclude that Heman fell into utter despair. And I’ll explain why in a moment.

One of the things that makes it so difficult for someone who experiences the six “D” words to acknowledge it openly is the belief, first of all, that he/she is all alone, that no one else could possibly know what they are going through, and secondly, the belief that it will never change. That is what makes Psalm 88 and the honest confession of Heman so immensely practical for us.

Psalm 88 has been called the darkest, most depressing, and saddest of all psalms. Unlike the other psalms of lament, this one does not conclude with praise or a declaration of joy or hope for renewed confidence in what God will do. It ends as it began: in grief and a sense of hopelessness. This disturbing fact has led some to suggest that Psalm 89 is really a continuation of Psalm 88. If that were the case it would be wonderful. After all, Psalm 89 opens with these glorious words of joy and exuberance: “I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations” (Ps. 89:1).

But aside from the natural desire to consummate Heman’s experience on a higher and happier note, there is little evidence to support this theory.

### *Who was Heman?*

Few Christians have ever heard the name of Heman. He was the father of **17 children** (14 boys and 3 girls) and one of the choir directors appointed by David to lead the congregation of Israel in praise and worship (see 1 Chronicles 6:31-33; 15:16-17; 16:41-42; 25:5-7). He was both a singer and a musician. Some suggest this may have been the source of his struggles, as it has often been noted that musicians are especially prone to radical mood swings. That may not be altogether fair, but it certainly applies in the case of this man who wrote such a woeful psalm.

As noted, Heman is as troubled at the close of this psalm as he was at the beginning. His anguish is **unrelenting**. His distress is **unrelieved**. In spite of the dark language of the psalm, he does at least acknowledge God as the source of his “salvation” (v. 1) and is persistent in his petitions both day and night: “Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry!” (v. 2) I’ll come back to these two important points in a minute. But aside from this there is no word of hope, no confidence or consolation for his soul.

His prayers go unanswered, or so it seems. His cry for help falls on deaf ears. Here’s how he put it:

“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” (vv. 3-7).

Like a jar brim-full of water, Heman’s soul overflows with trouble. He might as well be dead, for his life seems hardly worth living. Again, he laments:

“You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a horror to them” (v. 8a).

Perhaps Heman suffered from a disease or affliction that made his physical appearance loathsome to the sight (see Job 2:11-13; 17:7). Or it may simply be that his so-called friends could take it no more. Sadly, it doesn’t take much of an excuse for us to justify abandoning our friends when they fall prey to the six “D” words and become an imposition on our lives. No one enjoys spending too much time with a Job. Perhaps Heman’s trials finally became more than they were willing to bear. So they left him to his misery. It’s not a pretty sight:

“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?” (vv. 8b-12).

Heman is persistent in his prayers, but his patience is starting to wear thin. We don’t know how much Old Testament saints knew about the after-life, but Heman sees no profit for God should he die. “I can’t praise you from the grave,” he cries. “What good am I to you if these troubles end my life?”

“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” (vv. 13-17).

Like a lot of us, Heman can't help but interpret his distress as a sign that perhaps God has abandoned him. After all, it isn't as if he has suffered only for a while. Don't we all? Everyone at some time or other walks through seasons of doubt and distress, even depression. But it was different with Heman. He has seen hardship from his youth on. His agony is life-long. Hear his concluding words:

“You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness” (or, “darkness has become my only companion”; v. 18).

Bereft of friends, cut off from the compassion and love of his family, Heman has but one companion to soothe his pains: darkness! Alone, isolated, seemingly without hope, he feels engulfed by night. How tragic! As commentator Franz Delitzsch has said, “the gloom of melancholy does not brighten up to become a hope, the Psalm dies away in Job-like lamentation” (5:3:23).

I'm not at all suggesting that Heman's experience is normative. There is joy in Jesus. There is deliverance in God's grace and hope in his mercy. Still, we should not write him off as some sort of demented exception to an otherwise universal rule. Heman's experience is not as uncommon as we might think. There are people all around us who know and feel all too well the sorrows of Heman. They are not surprised by Psalm 88. They read it and nod with understanding. Like Heman, darkness is their closest friend.

If Heman shares anything with other psalmists, it is *brutal honesty*. When I read these plaintive hymns, I see nothing of our modern fear of exposure. The psalmists candidly declare their distress (4:1), sorrow (6:7), loneliness (25:16; 142:4), affliction (25:16), grief (35:14), mourning (35:14), fear (55:5), and dismay (143:4). They don't hesitate to confess that they are consumed by anguish (31:10), weak with sorrow (31:9; 119:28), worn out from groaning (6:6), bowed down and brought low (38:6), feeble and utterly crushed (38:8), troubled by sin (38:18), downcast (42:5-6), forlorn (35:12), faint (6:2), overcome by trouble (116:3), and in desperate need (79:8).

The last thing I want anyone to think, upon reading Psalm 88, is that their situation is hopeless. Although Heman never confessed it in so many words, I trust he knew, and I pray you know, that “the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love” (Ps. 33:18).

#### *Fighting Back against the Six “D” Words*

So what can be done? How are we supposed to respond and act when we find ourselves immersed in any one or perhaps all of the six “D” words? Is there no solution? I've painted a fairly dark and dismal portrait. Is that the end of the story? Is suicide the only reasonable response left to us? No. There is hope. We can even see a little of the remedy in Heman's own words. By the way, some of you have found a measure of relief from your experience of the six “D” words through prescribed medication. Praise God for the blessing of modern medical science. Do not think that you have fallen short or that it is sinful for you to rely on the relief that medication has provided. I say that at the same time I hold forth hope that perhaps by God's power and grace you may be set free and able to function and flourish without medication.

First, note well that no matter how bad it had gotten, no matter how close to utter despair he had come, he still believed that God was his God. Look again at his cry in v. 1. “O Lord, God of *my* salvation.” Heman knew that he was saved. His cry is agonizing to hear but at least it is directed at the God whom he knew and believed had forgiven his sins. He doesn't *feel* forgiven. That's obvious from the rest of the psalm. But he doggedly clung to the truth that God had genuinely forgiven him. He was a saved man.

If you find yourself identifying with Heman, the first thing you must do is to *reaffirm your salvation*. I don't care how badly you feel. I don't care whether or not you are able to experience the reality of being reconciled to God. *Assert it. Declare it. Repeat it over and over again.* This God who I often think has abandoned me is in point of fact *my* God, the God who has saved me. If he is *my* God, then I am still *his* child. Every fiber of my being, both emotionally and physically, may scream at me that God wants nothing to do with me. But I refuse to concede the lie. He is the God of “my salvation” (v. 1).

Second, as noted earlier, Heman never stops praying. He prays relentlessly. Look again at v. 1 where he declares: “I cry out *day and night* before you.” Again in v. 2, “Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry!” Again, in v. 9 we read: “*Every day* I call upon you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you.” If that weren’t enough, look at v. 13. “But I, O Lord, cry to you; *in the morning* my prayer comes before you.”

I don’t know where you are on the sliding scale of the six “D” words. But it doesn’t matter. Wherever you find yourself, don’t ever, ever, stop crying out to God. Don’t ever, ever, stop asking others to intercede on your behalf. Although the psalm itself doesn’t record for us that God answered Heman, I’m convinced he did. I’m convinced because I know who the God of Heman is and what he’s like and that he will never, ever, ultimately abandon any of his children. And he won’t abandon you.

Third, although Heman doesn’t say anything about this, many of the other psalmists do. They tell us that when our souls are somewhere on the spectrum of the six “D” words the solution is to stop, take hold of ourselves, and preach to our own souls.

What is one to do when all you’ve had for breakfast is tears, followed by a late night snack of sorrow? The answer of the psalmist sounds as strange as the question: *Preach to your soul!* Take yourself in hand, look yourself in the eyes, and preach this message: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Ps. 42:5,11).

So let’s not conclude today with Heman. Let’s move on to David and his determination to preach to himself and to continue to seek after God. We see this all through Psalm 42. Although probably written by the Sons of Korah (note the superscription), they likely describe David’s experience, perhaps during his time of exile when Absalom had rebelled (see Psalm 3).

No simple words will suffice to account for the depth and intensity of his longing for God. “I’m like a deer panting for flowing streams of life-giving water. *O God, I thirst for you!*” (Ps. 42:1-2). That sounds a lot like Heman, doesn’t it?

It would be enough had all he faced was the sense of God’s absence, but his grief was heightened by the taunts of others much in the way that Heman heard it from his enemies: “they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God?’” (Ps. 42:3). David was no doubt asking himself the same question! “O my God, where *are* you indeed?”

The lament continues in vv. 6-7, 9-10. “My soul is cast down within me” might more literally be rendered, “my soul prostrates itself upon me,” the picture being of the soul bent double upon itself, a vivid portrayal of a downcast and disconsolate person.

“Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me” (v. 7). This vivid imagery calls to mind an ancient Near Eastern symbol of the powers of chaos and evil crashing in upon him. Here’s how Charles Spurgeon described it: “His woes were incessant and overwhelming. Billow followed billow, one sea echoed the roaring of another; bodily pain aroused mental fear, Satanic suggestions chimed in with mistrustful forebodings, outward tribulation thundered in awful harmony with inward anguish: his soul seemed drowned as in a universal deluge of trouble” (1:B:274).

There is an unmistakable progression in David’s experience. It begins with his confession that he can’t seem to find God (42:1-2). This leads him to ask, “Why have you forgotten me?” (Ps. 42:9). In Psalm 43:2 he concludes that God has “rejected” him altogether. So he cries out repeatedly: “Why?” (Ps. 42:9a), “Why?” (Ps. 42:9b), “Why?” (Ps. 43:2).

What possible hope is there? The psalmist, though in lament, is not in despair. He turns his mind from the disease to the cure, from anguish to remembrance, deliberately recalling to mind God’s grace and faithfulness and covenant vow. He forces himself to think of realities other than his own troubles.

An essential element in preaching to our own souls is *remembrance* (42:4; 42:8; 43:3-4). “These things I remember as I pour out my soul” (42:4a). David begins by calling to mind those glorious seasons of *corporate celebration* at the temple of God (42:4). This was, no doubt, a bittersweet experience, for it both aggravates his distress (in that he is at

present far from it) and alleviates it (confident that in the future he will return). Although sensibly bereft of God's love, he reminds himself of God's steadfast affection for him (42:8).

There is no other way to put it: *David argues with himself!* He pulls himself together and regains his composure, preaching to his soul. "As though he were two men," says Spurgeon, "the Psalmist talks to himself. His faith reasons with his fears, his hope argues with his sorrows" (1:b:272). *David chides David out of the dumps!*

What does he say to himself? What should *you* say to *yourself*? Hope in God! Wait for God! This is no mindless meditation, a closing of the eyes or a passive twiddling of the thumbs. Rather we are to envision an expectant, straining anticipation for God's deliverance. This is a *spiritually aggressive confidence* that God will act and show himself faithful based on past performance.

In fact, David begins to praise God and thank him for his gracious deliverance while yet mired in his grief and affliction! "Hope in God, for *I shall* again praise him" (42:5b; 42:11b; 43:5b). Faith makes it possible to say, "Thank You" before one receives the answer. "Given what I know of God's record in dealing with his people," says David, "my confidence triumphs over my despair. I don't have to wait until he acts to thank him for doing so!"

There are several lessons to learn from Psalm 42 as we think about how to deal with the problem of Psalm 88.

First, the psalmist grieves, remembers, and composes himself with a sermon to his soul, not once, or even twice, but *three times* (Ps. 42:5, 11; 43:5). David never felt as if he were being needlessly repetitive or that his pleadings were akin to nagging. Rather, he was spiritually relentless, refusing to concede the battle to his enemies, knowing that his God was the kind of God who quenches the thirst of those who faithfully seek him for the water of renewal and hope.

Second, we learn much of the nature of prayer in these psalms. David gives vent to his fears and confusion, not merely in emotional catharsis but in a focused expression of faith that the God who acted graciously on his behalf in the past would do so yet again in the future. He is up front with God, telling it to him straight away on the assumption that God is sufficiently big and merciful to embrace it and absorb it.

Finally, the troubles that David endured (and dare I say, the troubles that you likewise often face), hardly catch God by surprise. They are not the result of some inadvertent oversight or weakness on his part. Look again at Psalm 42:7 where David refers to "the roar of **YOUR** waterfalls; all **YOUR** breakers and **YOUR** waves have gone over me." The powers of chaos, trouble and evil that threaten David's life are not beyond God's sovereign control. They all must submit to his overarching Lordship.

We saw the same thing in Psalm 88 with Heman, Look again at vv. 6-8 and vv. 15-16. You might think that to acknowledge that God is the ultimate cause of our distress would only add to it. But consider the alternative. Do you really find comfort in believing that God is helpless in the presence of your troubles, that he is frustrated that he cannot do more to help you? I would rather live with the mystery of how God is sovereign over my suffering than to do try to worship and love a God who is helpless to do anything about it.

### *Conclusion*

So, perhaps the time has come for you to take hold of yourself and preach a sermon, not to others, but to your own soul! Remember God's ways! Recall his faithfulness! Compose and calm yourself with the reminder that he who acted powerfully in the past will do so yet again in the present and future. Declare to yourself that God is the God of your salvation. And pray without ceasing.

I don't know with certainty what ultimately happened in the case of Heman. But I do know that we who are living in the glory and power of the New Covenant in Christ have this word of reassurance from the Lord:

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).