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choirmaster: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman
the Ezrahite.**

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Psalm 88

A Song. A Psalm of the Sons of Korah. To the choirmaster: according to Mahalath Leannoth. A Maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

(RSV)

¹ O LORD, my God, I call for help by day;
I cry out in the night before thee.

² Let my prayer come before thee,
incline thy ear to my cry!

³ For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.

⁴ I am reckoned among those who go down to the Pit;
I am a man who has no strength,

⁵ like one forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom thou dost remember no more,
for they are cut off from thy hand.

⁶ Thou hast put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.

⁷ Thy wrath lies heavy upon me,
and thou dost overwhelm me with all thy waves.

Selah

⁸ Thou hast caused my companions to shun me;
thou hast made me a thing of horror to them.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;

⁹ my eye grows dim through sorrow.
Every day I call upon thee, O LORD;
I spread out my hands to thee.

¹⁰ Dost thou work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise thee?

Selah

¹¹ Is thy steadfast love declared in the grave,
or thy faithfulness in Abaddon?

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

¹³ But I, O LORD, cry to thee;
in the morning my prayer comes before thee.

¹⁴ O LORD, why dost thou cast me off?
Why dost thou hide thy face from me?

¹⁵ Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer thy terrors; I am helpless.

¹⁶ Thy wrath has swept over me;
thy dread assaults destroy me.

¹⁷ They surround me like a flood all day long;
they close in upon me together.

¹⁸ Thou hast caused lover and friend to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.

Psalm 88 exhibits the deepest despair of any of the Psalms in the Psalter. There is not one word of joy or hope or confidence; unrelieved gloom is not pierced by a single ray of light. The last word of the Psalm is “darkness.” As in Psalm 22 this Psalmist addresses Yahweh, my God; but unlike Psalm 22 there is in this Psalm no expectation that God will cure the Psalmist and no promise to praise God upon recovery. This Psalm suggests that the Psalmist suffered from an incurable disease that had afflicted him all his life (verse 15), perhaps leprosy, because he complains that he is being shunned by all (verses 9, 19). He regarded his hopeless condition to be God’s punishment (verses 8, 15, 17-18). So in his despair he cries to God to relent and save him. His death, which seemed imminent, would take him to Sheol, the place where he would be completely cut off from any fellowship with Yahweh (verses 4-6, 11-13).

When Christians pray this Psalm, they must necessarily learn to regard death, not as something normal or natural, but as a terrible, even terrifying event. The normalness of death is highly abnormal; the naturalness of death is most unnatural before the God who in his goodness created us for life abundant. It is perhaps a mercy that the Bible gives voice to our fear of death, a mark of God’s gracious condescension that he provides our fallen nature with words with which to make our supplication to him in the midst of our fears. It is unquestionably a mercy that our divine Savior Jesus took upon himself our fallen human nature, and bearing all our fears, approached death in our stead, so that we might cling to him in our hour of despair.

Prayer to accompany Psalm 88:

Lord Jesus, author of our salvation and redeemer of all, for us you descended to the dead and broke the grip of death. Hear the prayers of your family, and lift us from our slavery in evil, that we may be set free to see your Father’s glory now and forever. Amen.