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S I L E N T

Finding Hope in the Psalms

L I G O N D U N C A N

Foreword by Mark Dever

“The Bible is strikingly candid about human suffering, including the vexing reality that God’s own people suffer—and often suffer excruciatingly and lastingly. Where do we find help? Ligon Duncan, one of the most faithful Christian teachers of our time, takes us deeply into the Psalms in a book that will be of great encouragement to all believers. I am so thankful for Ligon Duncan’s devotion to God’s word and the care of souls. Read this book, and you will understand why.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Here is a book that is short enough for the person who is gripped by suffering to actually read and yet rich enough to meet that individual’s need for perspective and hope in the darkest of times.”

Nancy Guthrie, Bible teacher; author, *Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow*

“Ligon Duncan shows us beautifully how, even in our deepest despair, we can have hope in God. We can run to him because he cares and understands. Through this book, Duncan continually lifts our gaze and reminds us that no matter our circumstances, our great God is sympathetic, sovereign, and sufficient. Read this book for yourself, or make it a gift to those struggling in their suffering. Here’s the truth: You are not alone. The Lord knows, and he hears.”

Greg Gilbert, Senior Pastor, Third Avenue Baptist Church,
Louisville, Kentucky

“Don’t let the brevity of this book fool you. It is packed with wisdom. Ligon Duncan’s insights from Psalms 88 and 89 are simple and fresh yet at the same time moving and profound. *When Pain Is Real and God Seems Silent* greatly encouraged me in my own suffering. I’d recommend it to anyone who has felt confused, isolated, or forgotten in their pain and who longs for a hope that endures.”

Vaneetha Rendall Risner, author, *The Scars That Have Shaped Me: How God Meets Us in Suffering*

“In the midst of our suffering we need a wake-up call to the truth that God’s steadfast love never ceases. The Psalms are a gentle and real reminder that even in the hardest moments, God is there. Ligon Duncan offers a wonderful companion to two of the most honest psalms in the Bible. He helps us marvel at the beauty and wonder of our God as he is described in these psalms. We’re reminded that our hope can be found only in God. Get out your Bible, read Psalms 88 and 89, and then read this short book. Your heart will be comforted by these truths.”

Dave Furman, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Church of Dubai; author, *Being There* and *Kiss the Wave*

“With pastoral care and theological precision, Ligon Duncan guides us through Psalms 88 and 89 to help us better understand suffering. *When Pain Is Real and God Seems Silent* is an honest assessment of life in a fallen world with the hope we have in Christ. In this short and accessible book, Duncan steers clear of trite phrases and clichés and instead provides solid truth that will actually sustain us in trials.”

Trillia Newbell, author, *Sacred Endurance; If God Is for Us; and Fear and Faith*

“Psalms of lament are missing in the church and in most believers’ prayers. Ligon Duncan helps us recover this historic language in his careful and thoughtful examination of these two important psalms. Overflowing with pastoral instinct, rich exposition, and helpful application, this short book on Psalms 88 and 89 is long overdue.”

Mark Vroegop, Lead Pastor, College Park Church, Indianapolis; author, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*

When Pain Is Real and God Seems Silent

When Pain Is Real and God Seems Silent

Finding Hope in the Psalms

Ligon Duncan

Foreword by Mark Dever

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Contents

Foreword	9
<i>Mark Dever</i>	
1 Psalm 88	13
2 Psalm 89	31
Notes	53
General Index	55
Scripture Index	57

Foreword

In 1895 Andrew Murray was staying as a guest in a home while traveling for preaching. One morning, he lay in bed because his back, injured a few years prior, was causing him severe pain. When his hostess brought him breakfast, she told him that a troubled woman had come to the house asking for his counsel. Murray handed her a piece of paper and said, “Just give her this advice I’m writing down for myself; it may be that she’ll find it helpful.” This is what was written:

In time of trouble say, “First, He brought me here. It is by His will I am in this strait place; in that I will rest.” Next, “He will keep me here in His love, and give me grace in this trial to behave as His child.” Then say, “He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me lessons He intends me to learn, and working in me the grace He means to bestow.” And last, say, “In His good time He can bring me out

again. How, and when, He knows.” Therefore say, “I am here (1) by God’s appointment, (2) in His keeping, (3) under His training, (4) for His time.”¹

Psalms 88 and 89 are about suffering. Psalm 88 is about individual suffering, and Psalm 89 is about corporate suffering, or suffering together. Ligon Duncan preached sermons on both of these psalms a few years apart at our church—Capitol Hill Baptist Church—in Washington, DC. You may still hear the original sermons at our church’s website (www.capbap.org).

Each sermon was fresh and full of truth and empathy. Each one was delivered powerfully and, at points, with loving tears. The compassion of our heavenly Father was appearing before us in his inspired word being preached to us with such care and feeling. Both times I thought not only of our benefiting from God’s word so preached but of how so many others could as well, if we would simply reduce these sermons to print and then edit and publish them. And here they are.

Having just read over them both, I am again moved by the power of these two psalms and by the simple, clear, and yet profound and sympathetic wisdom our God has shown us by inspiring them and including them in the book of Psalms. Everyone suffers. Everyone is confused by suffering. Part of that confusion is a sense of uniqueness and isolation. “No one

else feels like this. Who would understand what I'm going through here?"

In these two brief meditations, the thoughts of Heman and Ethan, two Ezrahites, are brought before us and examined. They are placed before us through Ligon Duncan's clear explanation and simple illustrations. As in these psalms, examples of suffering are given not as contradictions to a belief in God's sovereignty but as the variety of circumstances through which God may be trusted. The very darkness of the experience provides a dramatic background for the reemergence of hope.

Reflecting on the missionary life of Hudson Taylor, Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor observed that we experience "love first, then suffering, then a deeper love—thus only can God's work be done."² Psalms 88 and 89 remind us of this truth, help us see our sufferings, and then help us see our way through, with hope intact and faith—miraculously—deepened. May such be your experience as you read these two brief messages.

Thankful to the preacher and to the psalmists, we are most thankful for the God to whom they complained and in whom they rightly trusted.

Mark Dever
Capitol Hill Baptist Church
Washington, DC
July 2019

Psalm 88

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

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.

Chapter 1

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

You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a horror 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? *Selah*

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.

Psalm 88 is perhaps the most tragic psalm in all Scripture—no psalm is sadder. As one commentator writes, “This psalm is full of the dread of death as the psalmist laments his condition as one who is doomed to die.”¹ Or as Matthew Henry has noted,

This psalm is a lamentation, one of the most melancholy of all the psalms; and it does not conclude, as usually the melancholy psalms do, with the least intimation of comfort or joy, but, from first to last, it is mourning and woe.²

Historically, Christians have loved the Psalms because they express our deepest emotions and put into words our most severe experiences. At the same time, most psalms, even those that focus on suffering or sorrow, contain some explicit notes of redemption. No matter how low the psalmists get, most psalms of lament end with at least some spark of hope or word of grace. But not this one. The tone of Psalm 88 is unwaveringly dark.

That fact in itself is important. Psalm 88 describes what many Christians know to be true. Christians face troubles, often abiding, intractable ones. Our Lord himself warned us that we would encounter difficulty as we followed him. Yet despite Scripture’s warnings, many Christians still feel confused and bewildered when they encounter various trials (James 1:2).

False teachers often capitalize on the suffering of Christians to promote false doctrine. For instance, prosperity-gospel peddlers assert that if you simply had enough faith, your troubles would go away. Obviously, we need only look to the examples of the apostle Paul and of the Lord himself to demonstrate just how false these sentiments are.

At the same time, many well-meaning Christians regrettably offer similar advice to suffering saints, encouraging those in great pain simply to “let go and trust God more—move on with life.” Of course, it’s never a bad idea to trust God or to encourage others to do the same. But as we minister to the suffering, we must also lend a sympathetic ear and exercise great patience. People must process pain and sorrow, not simply “let go” of it.

Even more troubling, some Christians buy into the lie that believers never live with unanswered prayer or unrelieved suffering. And yet this psalm shows quite the opposite. Sometimes God ordains that believers endure chronic pain and chooses never to relieve them of their thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

This psalm is unremittingly dark. And the psalmist never *explicitly* articulates a hope of redemption. But even in the midst of this dark and melancholy psalm, even in the midst of the lamentation and tears, if we look carefully enough and read this psalm in the context of all Scripture, we can

still find a glimmer of hope and a few lessons about trusting God in hard times.

What Can Miserable Christians Sing?

Several years ago, Carl Trueman wrote an article asking a provocative question: “What Can Miserable Christians Sing?” As Trueman notes, most of the songs Christians sing in church express only happiness—or even worse, a trite and chipper attitude toward the Christian life. Our songs are exclusively happy, as if that were the only emotion Christians ought to experience. But what do miserable Christians sing? Trueman argues that Christians should look once again to the Psalms as a way of expressing sorrow and lament:

The psalms, the Bible’s own hymnbook, have almost entirely dropped from view in the contemporary Western evangelical scene. I am not certain about why this should be, but I have an instinctive feel that it has more than a little to do with the fact that a high proportion of the psalter is taken up with lamentation, with feeling sad, unhappy, tormented, and broken. In modern Western culture, these are simply not emotions which have much credibility: sure, people still feel these things, but to admit that they are a normal part of one’s everyday life is tantamount to admitting that one has failed in today’s health, wealth, and happiness society. And, of

course, if one does admit to them, one must neither accept them nor take any personal responsibility for them: one must blame one's parents, sue one's employer, pop a pill, or check into a clinic in order to have such dysfunctional emotions soothed and one's self-image restored. . . .

In the psalms, God has given the church a language which allows it to express even the deepest agonies of the human soul in the context of worship.³

So what do Christians sing when despondent, depressed, or discouraged? Psalm 88 is, in part, an answer to that question.

Surveying the Psalm: Four Observations

Perhaps you think that Christians *shouldn't* experience despair—or at least you assume that godly, mature Christians won't ever feel that way. And yet, consider the author of this psalm. According to the heading, this psalm was written by Heman the Ezrahite. Heman is mentioned throughout the Old Testament as a man who led the people of God in worship, a poet-theologian par excellence. According to 1 Kings 4:31, Heman the Ezrahite was one of the five wisest men in his generation. He was renowned for his depth, insight, and maturity.

Yet for Heman the Ezrahite, all the lights had gone out. Despite his constant prayer, his life situation seemed to attest

*“In the midst of our suffering we need a wake-up call
to the truth that God’s steadfast love never ceases.”*

DAVE FURMAN

Senior Pastor, Redeemer Church of Dubai;
author, *Being There* and *Kiss the Wave*

Are you feeling despondent, depressed, or discouraged? When we encounter severe trials and suffering, we are often tempted to think that our situation is somehow out of God’s hands. In these dark times, God seems silent, and we feel isolated, confused, and alone. Everyone experiences suffering; even the biblical writers expressed anguish at times. This emotion is clearly captured in the Psalms. Through these brief meditations on Psalms 88 and 89, Ligon Duncan shows us how to respond to our own suffering with the assurance of our heavenly Father’s mercy, which sustains us even in the darkest circumstances.

“Ligon Duncan, one of the most faithful Christian teachers of our time, takes us deeply into the Psalms in a book that will be of great encouragement to all believers. I am so thankful for Ligon Duncan’s devotion to God’s word and the care of souls.”

R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.
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“Here is a book that is short enough for the person who is gripped by suffering to actually read, and yet rich enough to meet that individual’s need for perspective and hope in the darkest of times.”

NANCY GUTHRIE
author, *Hearing Jesus Speak
into Your Sorrow*

LIGON DUNCAN (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is the chancellor, CEO, and John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary. He previously served as the senior minister of the historic First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi, for seventeen years. Duncan has edited, written, or contributed to numerous books.

SUFFERING

