One blustery winter day a bird was freezing his feathers off. He was shivering against the side of a barn, trying to stay warm. And that’s when it happened. A horse passing by dumped a pile of manure on the bird. Though distasteful, the manure warmed the bird, and in his joy he began to sing. That’s when the cat heard him, promptly dug him out, and ate him. There are three lessons in this story. First, not everyone who dumps on you is your enemy. Second, not everyone who digs you out is your friend. And third, if you’re ever up to your neck in it, don’t sing.

I heard the mayor of Kansas City tell this story, but the sons of Korah, responsible for our psalm today, would have found the same lessons—especially that last one: if you’re ever up to your neck in it, don’t sing.

I invite you to open your Bible to Psalm 88:6-7—a psalm Walter Brueggemann called “an embarrassment to conventional faith.” This is one of the many lament songs in the Psalms. Lament psalms are those woe-is-me, where-is-God, life-really-stinks psalms. And yet in every lament psalm except one, the psalmist prays through his lament to praise or assurance or hope—in every lament psalm but one. Psalm 88 is that one. Positive thinkers don’t like this psalm. Prosperity theologians ignore it. And even your average Christ-follower isn’t exactly sure what to make of it either. So let’s give it a look this morning as we continue our Summer Songs series. Each Sunday we unpack a psalm, connect it to a popular song from our culture, and learn how to sing the Christ-life in our day. Our song this morning sounds like it may have been written by the same folks who wrote Psalm 88. Let the music begin ...

A Man of Constant Sorrow—an American folk song maybe as old as the late 1800s, first recorded in 1928, and made popular by the fictitious Soggy Bottom Boys in the 2000 film, O Brother, Where Art Thou? Those are some pretty sad lyrics. And Psalm 88 is a pretty sad psalm. Hear just a clip of the psalm-song in the word of the Lord ... (read the text).

Talk about a man of constant sorrow. He’s as blue as it gets—the lowest pit, the darkest depths, God’s heavy wrath and all its waves. Picture the psalmist bobbing up and down in the ocean, gasping for breath, reaching out a hand for help, sinking, sinking, sinking. A man of constant sorrow for sure.

And we just read a couple of verses. I didn’t mention that the psalmist’s soul is full of trouble, that he’s on the edge of death, that he feels God has taken away his friends and made him repulsive to them. I didn’t mention that he believes God has rejected him and is hiding from him, that

1Walter Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 78.
he’s been afflicted from his youth and that he’s been swallowed up by the terrors of the Lord. This psalmist is not just having a bad day, he’s having a bad life. Having been schooled in other lament psalms, we keep waiting for him to say, “But the Lord is my salvation. The Lord will deliver me, and I will praise Him forever.” But he never says that. He never gets there. In the very first verse of the psalm he prays, “O Lord, the God who saves me,” and things go quickly downhill from there. He’s called out to God over and over again, getting only silence for an answer. So now he just sits in the dark and waits. Listen to the very last line: “and darkness is my closest friend.” Wow! A man of constant sorrow for sure. Read the psalm and pass the Prozac. This is some pretty discouraging stuff.

But even a gloomy, bluesy psalm-song like this is worth a look. It keeps us honest. It wipes phony smiles off our faces. It teaches us a thing or two.

I

The psalm reminds us that life can get pretty dark for God’s people. I don’t know why it is, but for some reason, many Christ-followers believe that because they love God, they should get some sort of free pass from troubles. Why do you think the first question that usually pops up in our minds when trouble overwhelms us is, “Why? Why me? Why now? Why, God?” In our minds, most of us know better, but in our hearts we’re not so sure. If God is good and we love God, shouldn’t only good things happen to those who love God, to those God loves? It only seems right, but nothing could be further from the truth.

And it’s not like God has done false advertising. He never promises an easy life to those who follow Him—quite the contrary really. Jesus said that if a person chooses to follow Him, he can expect relationship troubles, persecution, and the general struggles that plague both those who follow Him and those who don’t. “God sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous,” Jesus said (Mt. 5:45). “In this world you will have tribulation,” Jesus said (Jn. 16:33). “The Lord disciplines those he loves,” say the writers of Proverbs and Hebrews (Prov. 3:12; Heb. 12:6). There’s no false advertising here.

Look at some of the biblical characters. Blameless Job suffered more in a few months than most of us do in a lifetime. Righteous David had to run for his life and hide out in caves to escape the sword of sinful Saul. When Deacon Stephen preached his Jesus-sermon, he didn’t just get bad reviews; he was pelted with stones until he died. Missionary Paul suffered terribly with an unnamed “thorn” in his flesh. And perfect, sinless Jesus himself got nailed to a cross for our sins. There is no false advertising in the Bible.
And there’s no false advertising in the history of the church. Church history, including our own era, is littered with the bodies of martyrs who loved Jesus more than life. If you stacked their bodies like cords of firewood, I don’t know many miles it would stretch. And we all know devoted Christ-followers in our own congregation who have developed cancers, buried children, lost jobs, had spouses leave them for no good reason, and faced any number of trials and tribulations in spite of their deep devotion to Christ. No false advertising here.

The only false advertising in this regard comes from preachers who teach that God wants everybody to be rich and healthy in this life. But that is a false gospel. Nowhere does the Bible promise or even suggest an easy life, a pain-free life, or a charmed life, for those who love and follow God. In spite of the incredible amount of joy that comes with the Christian life, like the Surgeon General, maybe God should put a warning label on the Scripture: “Warning: Following Christ can be hazardous to your life.”

This psalm reminds us of something we know but find difficult to accept: life can get pretty dark for God’s people.

II

And the psalm also reminds us of this: God’s people tend to overrate their troubles. Listen to the psalmist: “You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.”

Oh, really? The lowest pit? The darkest depths? All the waves of God’s wrath? Is there really no pit lower than yours, no depth darker than yours? Are you really under all the waves of God’s wrath? You may be a man of constant sorrow, Mr. Psalmist, but have you not been spared from some struggle along the way? Are your troubles worse than Job’s or Joseph’s or Jeremiah’s? God’s people tend to overrate their troubles.

It doesn’t mean your troubles aren’t bad. It doesn’t mean that your pit is not low, your depth is not dark, and that you’re not feeling very much as if some referee should throw a penalty flag on God for piling on. But don’t overrate your troubles. I have a cartoon in my files of a Christian making a hospital visit. The Christian has a splint on his finger, and he’s visiting a man in a body cast with one leg suspended in a sling. And the Christian holds up his bandaged finger and says, “I know just how you feel.” Acknowledge the depth of your troubles, but don’t overrate them.

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²I am indebted to C. H. Spurgeon for this particular insight and for general insights into this text in his sermon “For the Troubled” in Warren W. Wiersbe, ed., Classic Sermons on Suffering (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 48-50. (This edition published by Hendrickson.)
We have a family in the church that has had it bad for a long time now. The husband has M.S. and had to retire early from a job he enjoyed. The wife got cancer and has been in treatments for a year. The daughter has ongoing health issues related to migraines and all that goes with it. The wife’s mother developed cancer and treatments aren’t doing the job. The wife’s grandmother contracted cancer and was dead in a few short weeks. And in spite of wrestling honestly with their faith, this family has held on to the God who is holding on to them. They are tracing the rainbow through the rain and still finding a word of praise here and there in the midst of all that trouble. It’s inspiring. Maybe I overrate their troubles, but they don’t.

And don’t you overrate yours. I don’t say that to minimize your pain. And I would never say to a person in some pit of tribulation, “You think you’ve got it bad, you ought to see what happened to Jean.” I wouldn’t say that. But I would say this:

I know you’re in a low pit and a dark depth. I know you feel like God is piling on more than you can stand. But could I point you to the One who really was in the lowest pit, who really was in the darkest depth? Could I point you to the One who felt pressing down on Him all the waves of God’s wrath? His name is Jesus. See Him there on the cross. He knows how you feel. He understands how you feel. He is a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. And because of His sufferings, He can enter into yours and lift you up. He can touch you at the place no one else can reach. And He can see you through your trouble to a better day.

Only one person in history has lived in the lowest pit, the darkest depth, and felt the full force of the wrath of God. That person is Jesus, and He’s got your back. So let’s learn to keep our troubles in perspective and not give in to our very human tendency to overrate them. The psalm reminds us of that.

III

And it also reminds us of this: we are wise to trace our troubles to God. This is a controversial statement to some. Many of my pastor and theologian friends beg to differ here. “You can’t blame God for troubles. What kind of God would send calamity and trouble to His people?” Early in my ministry, that was my thinking too. But after having been a pastor for a while, after having been with people in about every trouble under the sun, I got tired of a semi-competent God who was pretty much confined to the sidelines as only a sympathetic spectator to the bad stuff in the lives of those I ministered to. I wearied of feeling the need to defend God from the angry feelings of hurting people. I quit feeling the need to protect hurting people from the large
God of the Scripture who loves us so much that He will bend us and break us and bless us to the end that our lives will reflect His glory. And I quit feeling the need to have to apologize for a God who has promised to be with us in our trials and to twist even the worst things that happen to us toward some good end.

All I’m doing in believing this is cutting to the chase. I’m not saying we don’t bring many of our troubles on ourselves. We do. Our own stupid decisions and sinful choices—like drinking and promiscuous sex and lies and deceit and living beyond our means—lead to a lot of our troubles. I’m not trying to pin our responsibility on God. But when troubles land on our doorstep that are not of our own making, trace those troubles to God—even if they come at the hand of another. Trace those troubles to the God who created our world and, for reasons known only to Him, allowed evil to be a player in it. Trace those troubles to the God who created Adam and Eve and gave them a choice to obey Him or not to obey Him. They decided not to obey God, and now we live in a fallen, germ-ridden, back-breaking environment with temptation around every bend. Trace your troubles to God. We can certainly nuance this discussion by talking about the difference between God’s causative will and God’s permissive will, and that’s an important and helpful distinction. But whether God causes a trouble or merely permits it, push your trouble all the way back and ultimately it falls in lap of God—the God who could have stopped it … but didn’t.

That’s the way believers in the Bible saw it. Listen again to the psalmist: “You have put me in the lowest pit …. Your wrath lies heavily upon me ….” He traced his troubles to God. And he’s in good company. Job did the same thing. We know that Satan created Job’s turmoil, but Satan had to get permission from God to do it. And in the New Testament, Paul called his agonizing “thorn” in the flesh a “messenger of Satan” yet designed by God to keep him humble (2 Cor. 12:7). As one theologian summed it up, “Job and Paul have this in common: When struck by Satan, they felt the hand of God. Ultimately, their suffering was from the Lord, and they knew it.”

And instead of being a discouragement, that should be an encouragement. Our troubles are not the result of bad luck or bad karma or fate. Our troubles are not the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time or of some odd coincidence. Our troubles can be traced to God—the One who is all-wise and all-powerful and all-loving toward you and me. He is the God who knows both our needs and our limits. He is the God who knows what it takes to make us more like Christ and who loves us enough to do it. And He is the God who can make sense of our troubles, help us deal with our troubles, and even make good use of them for our good and for His glory. That should

3John Piper, Brothers, We Are Not Professionals (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 138.
give us courage to face our troubles knowing that whether we feel God or not, He is in those troubles somewhere. He is with us.

This psalmist of constant sorrow reminds us to trace our troubles to God.

IV

And he also reminds us to call on God in our troubles and wait for him to act. Even though he’s singing the blues and banging out minor chords, don’t you admire his faith and perseverance? He wanted rescue and felt wrath. He called on God and got silence in return. But he didn’t give up. He didn’t lose faith. Over and over in the psalm—in the morning, every day, day and night—he kept calling out to God. He was overwhelmed by his troubles, but he didn’t give up on God. He prayed and he waited. Maybe that’s because he knew that his only hope was God. In v. 1 he prays, “O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry before you.” He knew God was there. He knew God was a Savior. So in spite of God’s silence in the midst of his troubles, he prayed and he waited. He kept the conversation going with God even when it felt one-sided. He rightly reasoned that if God is ultimately behind his troubles, then God can also give him relief from his troubles. He had to be frustrated that when He called out to God, God had His fingers in His ears, but the psalmist didn’t give up. He prayed and he waited.

Such faith is impressive and instructive. I only wish in his frustration, I could share with this Old Testament saint some New Testament Scripture.

• I’d turn his attention to Jesus’ words in John 16:33 — “These things I have spoken unto you that in me you might have peace. In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

• Then I’d show him 2 Corinthians 4:8, 16-17 — “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us and eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

• And finally I’d point him to Romans 8:35-39 — “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present or the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In spite of the fact that the psalmist didn’t know about Jesus, in spite of the fact that the Holy Spirit had yet to indwell believers, the psalmist kept calling out to God and waiting for Him to act. Surely as New Testament believers we can do as much. We know that God is with us whether we can see Him or not. We know that God is for us even when the evidence points the other way. We know that in the power of the Holy Spirit and the fruit He bears in our lives, we can suffer long as we wait on God to act. We can, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might” (6:10). And we know that even if death is the end result, death won’t get the victory and death won’t get the last word because our lives are eternally safe with God in heaven. That’s the way today’s song ends, you know. That man of constant sorrow clings to the promise that even when death lays him in a cold, dark grave, he will stand on God’s golden shore. No matter how dark it gets for us, we have resources in the present, and we have hope for the future when our lives are rooted in God.

That’s biblical faith. That’s what enabled a broken Job to say, “I will wait for my renewal to come” (Job 14:14). That’s what enabled another psalmist to say, “I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand” (Ps. 40:1-2) That’s what enabled still another psalmist to say, “You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy” (Ps. 30:11). And that’s what enabled Paul to find hope in his struggle when He heard God say, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

We don’t get to see the psalmist’s answer in our psalm, but there are plenty of other troubled people in the Scripture who prayed and waited and got their answer.

So in your troubles, call out to God and wait on Him to act.

V

Are you a man or woman of constant sorrow? Then this psalm-song is for you. Do you feel pretty much swallowed up by the darkness? Then make this psalm your prayer. Pray to God, wait on God, and hang in there until your darkness is turned to light again.

I love Anne Lamont’s story of a mother whose two-year-old child accidentally locked himself in a room one night. She heard him calling for her, “Mommy! Mommy!” She couldn’t open the door from the outside so she kept
saying, “*Just jiggle the doorknob, honey.*” But he didn’t understand because he was sobbing and scared. The woman didn’t know what else to do and finally fell to her knees and slid her fingers under the door. She told him to bend down and find her fingers. Finally he did, and they stayed like that for a long time, on the floor, holding fingers in the dark. Finally, he stopped crying and calmed down. Then she said, “*Now stand up and jiggle the doorknob.*” He did, and after a while the door popped open.4

If you ever feel like that two-year-old in the dark—trapped, lost, and alone in your troubles—then cry out to God, wait on an answer. God is with you. God is for you. Nothing can separate you from His love. And if the only sign of God’s presence are a few fingers to hold onto in the dark, then you hold fingers with God. And in God’s good time, your darkness will become the dawn, and you constant sorrow won’t be so constant anymore.

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John Scott McCallum II