

# A Singer's Darkness - Psalm 88

*"O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 88:14)*

## Introduction to the Series: "Dealing with Doubt"

In his monumental book, *A Secular Age*, philosopher Charles Taylor contrasts what it felt like to live in the premodern world with what it feels like to live now in our modern world—when it comes to belief in God. Five-hundred years ago, it was difficult *not* to believe in God: there were virtually no other imaginable alternatives. Today, we are presented with many options for pursuing a meaningful life, with or without belief in God. Believers sometimes find themselves beset with doubt, while unbelievers sometimes find themselves wondering whether God might be real after all.

This means that doubt—feeling uncertain about your foundational beliefs—has become a more common experience. But we should not think that doubt is a uniquely modern thing. Heroes of the faith—Abraham, Moses, Job, Elijah, David, John the Baptist, Peter, and Thomas—all wrestled, at some point in their lives, with feelings of uncertainty.

In this series *Dealing with Doubt*, we will study several characters from the Bible who experienced times of doubt.

## Two Kinds of Doubt

Throughout this series, we will emphasize that there are two kinds of doubt. One kind vacillates between trusting God and trusting something else. This is the kind of doubt that James warns about when he writes, "The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. . . . That person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:5-8). This kind of vacillation is both deliberate and avoidable.

But there is another kind of doubt that is less avoidable, perhaps because it is part and parcel with living in a sin-cursed world. This kind of doubt can be triggered when we suffer deeply. Or it can be triggered when we observe people who have no serious regard for God yet seem to live perfectly contented lives. This kind of doubt agonizes over questions such as: Why would God let me suffer like this (Psalm 22:1-2)? Is Jesus really the Savior of the world (Matthew 11:2-6)? Why would God allow crooked people to have so much success (Psalm 73:1-3)?

What should we do with these questions? Our tendency is to look for the quickest way to rid ourselves of them—even pushing them out of our mind before we give them serious attention. The Bible, however, presents a different strategy. Instead of pushing away these feelings of uncertainty, characters in the Bible give voice to their doubts. Specifically, they turn their doubts into questions and direct these questions to God. This is because, *although doubt makes us vulnerable, it can also be a step toward deeper faith.*

## Pictures of Doubt

You can think of doubt like taking a step forward. In order to take a step, you have to risk balancing momentarily on just one foot. In this position, you are vulnerable and more prone to fall over. But once you take the step, not only do you land again on both feet, but you've also made progress. In a similar way, doubt brings a time of potential imbalance, even the chance of tumbling over. But by moving through the doubt, instead of standing still, you can make progress.

You can also think of doubt as an excavation project. Imagine an excavator scooping huge piles of dirt and rocks out of the ground. That excavator might just be leaving a big hole. Or it might be preparing the ground for a deep foundation to go in. It's the same with doubt. After the excavator of doubt has gouged into your heart and mind, it could leave you with an empty crater. Or it could be clearing away loose and shallow thoughts about God and his ways to replace them with a deeper, stronger foundation of faith.

## Psalm 88: A Singer's Darkness

Psalm 88 is one of the darkest psalms in the Bible. Its author, Heman, might be the wise man referred to in 1 Kings 4:31, or one of David's musicians mentioned in 1 Chronicles 15:17—or both, if these passages refer to the same person. Since these psalms were meant to be sung, we will refer to the psalmist as "the singer." In our study of this psalm, we will see:

1. How the singer felt (his darkness)
2. What the singer did (his direction)
3. What we can learn from this (our discoveries)

### I. How the singer felt (his *darkness*)

A. He felt overwhelmed - 88:3, 7, 17

It was not just one event but the accumulation of hardships that caused him to experience such darkness. For us too, doubt often comes not just at one event, but at the intersection of several hardships.

B. He felt close to death - 88:3, 10-12

The singer's purpose in asking the morbid questions in verses 10-12 is not to cast doubt on the possibility that God can raise the dead. Rather, he is trying to reason with God by saying, in effect, "I'm about to die. Is this really what you want to happen?" When we feel close to death, we lose the luxury of pondering God and the afterlife as theoretical concepts. Instead, we feel that we must know whether these things are real or not.

C. He felt abandoned - 88:8, 18

Suffering people know the tremendous value of companionship. As one person put it, "Friendship doubles life's joys and halves its sorrows." But what if

those friendships are gone? What if the friends are not merely absent, but purposely shun us? That would certainly erase what little joy we have, and double the sorrow. “When my father and my mother forsake me,” King David once wrote, “the Lord will take me in” (Psalm 27:10). Lonely people often find comfort in knowing God is with them, as the Apostle Paul testified: “But the Lord stood by me” (2 Timothy 4:16-17). The singer in this psalm, however, didn’t even have this comfort. He felt abandoned by God. Besides that, he knew why: he had sinned, and he was feeling God’s wrath (88:7).

**D. He felt answerless - 88:14**

We would hope that the singer would experience a turn-around like Asaph did. In Psalm 73, Asaph confessed that trying to understand why God would allow the wicked to flourish “seemed a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end” (Psalm 73:16-17). But the singer of Psalm 88 has no such answer, no such light. His questions are met by silence, and his only companion is the darkness (88:18).

So where do we find hope in this psalm?

## **II. What the singer did with what he felt (his direction)**

There is something present in every single verse that tells us that the singer has shut the door on despair and is moving toward deeper faith—and that something is *prayer*. Even in his agonized questions, his entire direction is toward God.

**A. Who he moves toward: “The God of my salvation” - 88:1** The opening phrase of the psalm assures us that, though it is so dark, there is One in the darkness who knows and saves: the God of my salvation.

**B. How he moves toward him**

In prayer - The singer refuses to keep silent - 88:2

In honest prayer - The singer refuses to sugar-coat his feelings

In verbal prayer - The singer puts his thoughts into words

In non-verbal prayer - The singer recognizes that there are some feelings too deep even for words - 88:9, Romans 8:26

## **III. What we can learn from this (our discoveries)**

**A. We learn something about Christ.** The abandonment of the singer was more *felt* than it was *real*. Jesus, on the other hand, experienced genuine abandonment because he became the bearer of the world’s sin (John 1:29-32; Psalm 22:1; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Because Christ bore our sin, we have the assurance that, if we have trusted in Christ, we will never be abandoned by God (Hebrews 13:5-6).

**B. We learn something about dealing with our doubts.** Asking questions does not mean we are losing our faith, and assigning to God the responsibility for our troubles is far better than the alternative: a world in which there is no meaning or hope (see Habakkuk 1:1-2:3).

**C. We learn something about helping others with their doubts.** We can listen to others’ honest questions without rebuking them for asking. We can follow Jesus’ example who responds to questions with *both* answers *and* tears (John 11:22-27, 32-33).

## **Application Questions**

1. How can we tell the difference between healthy questioning that deepens our faith and doubt that erodes our belief? Can you give an example from your personal experience of something that you thought would erode your faith, but ended up deepening it?
2. What is your personal tendency when doubtful questions suggest themselves to your mind? How has this study changed or refined how you will think through these questions?
3. The study of Psalm 88 focuses on the singer's feelings of being overwhelmed, close to death, abandoned, and answerless. How do these emotions resonate with real-life struggles you have faced, or are facing?
4. What significance does the phrase “The God of my salvation” hold in the context of Psalm 88, and how can this understanding influence our approach to doubt?
5. One application of this message is that we can help others in their doubts by listening without rebuking and responding with both answers and empathy. How can we practically implement this approach in our relationships? How can the church be a community of both truth and compassion?
6. By giving voice to a sense of abandonment, the Psalm reminds us of Jesus’ genuine, though temporary abandonment by God when he hung dying on the cross. How does this insight impact our understanding of God's presence with us in moments of doubt?