

## Disperse the Gloomy Clouds of Night

### Advent When God Feels Absent

Psalm 88

David Sunday

December 1, 2013

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On this first Sunday of Advent, we praise You, Lord that Emmanuel has come. We look forward with great anticipation to His coming again when He will make all things new. Creation itself is groaning and we, through the Spirit, join now in groaning for that full redemption. We say come, Lord Jesus. We believe that we shall see Your goodness in the land of the living. We wait for You, Lord. Right now we pray as we open Your Word that You would strengthen our hearts, that we may be strong, that our hearts may take courage as we wait for Your return. In a dry and weary land where there is no water, our souls thirst for You, God. Come and satisfy us with Your steadfast love. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The word advent means coming or appearing. I love this season of the church year when we look back and think about the saints in the Old Testament and how they waited for the coming of Messiah and then He finally appeared. Now we look forward to His coming again. I love how advent corresponds in the Midwest with the darkest time of year because Jesus came into the bleak mid-winter of our broken world and brought us heaven's light.

I want to invite you to turn to Psalm 88. You'll see from the invitation cards that we have at the Welcome Table for the Christmas concert that will be moving from gloom to glory in the Psalms. This Psalm seems out of sync with the theme from gloom to glory. It seems dissonant in its tone because instead of moving from gloom to glory, this Psalm, as D.A. Carson says, moves from gloom into ever deeper gloom. Out of all the Psalms in the Psalter, this one is probably the bleakest. Psalm 88 has been called "the basement of the Psalter"—there's only way from here and it's up. It's been called "the Death Valley of the Psalms" or "theology in a minor key." It's been said of this Psalm that there's no sadder Psalm in the entire Bible. I'll admit that it's not my favorite Psalm so don't worry that I have a fixation with sad Psalms. But I'm very glad God included this in His Scriptures for us today. I've been eager to preach on this Psalm for some time now.

So as I read this Psalm and we listen to God's Word together, I want you to be asking these questions:

- Do you hear any hope in this Psalm?

- If so, where do you hear hope?
- If not, why did God put a Psalm like this in His Bible?

Let's worship God as we listen to His Word. The superscription says,

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

Listen now to the Holy Word of God:

- <sup>1</sup> O LORD, God of my salvation;  
I cry out day and night before you.
- <sup>2</sup> Let my prayer come before you;  
incline your ear to my cry!
- <sup>3</sup> For my soul is full of troubles,  
and my life draws near to Sheol.
- <sup>4</sup> I am counted among those who go down to the pit;  
I am a man who has no strength,
- <sup>5</sup> 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.
- <sup>6</sup> You have put me in the depths of the pit,  
in the regions dark and deep.
- <sup>7</sup> Your wrath lies heavy upon me,  
and you overwhelm me with all your waves. *Selah*
- <sup>8</sup> 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;
- <sup>9</sup> my eye grows dim through sorrow.  
Every day I call upon you, O LORD;  
I spread out my hands to you.
- <sup>10</sup> Do you work wonders for the dead?  
Do the departed rise up to praise you? *Selah*
- <sup>11</sup> Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,  
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
- <sup>12</sup> Are your wonders known in the darkness,  
or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?
- <sup>13</sup> But I, O LORD, cry to you;  
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
- <sup>14</sup> O LORD, why do you cast my soul away?  
Why do you hide your face from me?
- <sup>15</sup> Afflicted and close to death from my youth up,  
I suffer your terrors; I am helpless.
- <sup>16</sup> Your wrath has swept over me;  
your dreadful assaults destroy me.
- <sup>17</sup> They surround me like a flood all day long;  
they close in on me together.

<sup>18</sup> *You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;  
my companions have become darkness.*

This is God's Holy Word. Thanks be to God for this portion of the Scriptures.

An article I read got me thinking: what if you and I were on a committee to select hymns for the Book of Psalms? I'm pretty sure I would have suggested some more work needed to go into this one. I think I would have said it has promise but it's not quite ready for publication.

First of all, it's very raw. It's visceral. It teeters close to the edge of irreverence. Are believers allowed to talk to God like this? How would we feel if someone prayed a prayer like this in our monthly prayer meeting this Wednesday night? Would someone afterwards be tempted to tidy up the prayer in a nice theological package?

Secondly, not only is this Psalm raw, it's awfully bleak. Most of us come to church to be lifted up. We don't want to sing songs in a minor key and we especially don't want them to end like this—in gloom and dark desperation. This is not the way it's supposed to end.

But I'm grateful I wasn't on the Psalm selection committee because without Psalm 88, we'd be missing a compelling witness to how deeply God understands a grieving, despondent soul.

Here we meet a worship leader named Heman. He is most likely the same man who is named in 1 Chronicles 6: 33, among those *"men whom David put in charge of the service of song in the house of the LORD after the ark rested there."* He comes from a rich lineage: his grandfather is Samuel. He has a noble vocation: to minister *"with song before the tabernacle of the tent of meeting"* (1 Chronicles 6:32). But our worship leader is not in a happy mood and it's been like this for a long time. If Heman were to candidate in America today for the position of worship leader, no one would hire him. We'd say he's been "off his game" for a long time. People would be leaving church saying, "I had a hard time worshipping today. That service didn't feel very worshipful. Heman doesn't try to whip up our emotions and tell us to trade our sorrows for the joy of the Lord" (adapted from *Trading My Sorrows* by Darrell Evans). Instead, he turns our gaze to a God Whom he feels has forsaken him. He wants us to hear his experience of God's absence."

He doesn't just give us a verse or two of sorrow, followed by a cheery note of victory and triumph. He leaves us in the dark. The last word of this Psalm in Hebrew is "darkness." Then the screen fades to black. That's troubling! How can a Psalm like this function in the Scriptures, whose very purpose Paul tells us is to give us hope? Listen to what Paul says in Romans 15:4 about the Old Testament Scriptures:

*"Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope"*

So how does Psalm 88 promote God's agenda to bring hope to His people? How does this Psalm inspire endurance? How does this dark Psalm bring us encouragement? How does this Psalm breathe hope?

It does so in at least three ways:

1. This Psalm shows us **footprints** on a deserted island.
2. This Psalm gives us a **script** for voicing unspeakable sorrow to the Lord.
3. This Psalm serves as a **signpost** pointing to a Light the darkness cannot extinguish.

## 1. This Psalm Shows Us Footprints on a Deserted Island

These footsteps are the reason this Psalm brings us hope. When Charles Spurgeon was introducing a sermon on this Psalm to his London congregation about 130 years ago, he admitted it was the darkest and dreariest of the Psalms. "Why then," he asked, "would we read it in church? Because there is in every church some poor heart who is very heavy. In fact, there could be a dozen souls here today who are almost driven to despair."

You might not feel like you're going through Psalm 88 right now. In fact, you may never have even come close to identifying with this Psalmist, and by God's mercy there may never come a time in your life when things get this dark and dreary. But you, too, need to read Psalm 88. You can't say, "Well, I don't feel like that. I don't identify with that. I don't want to deal with that." God calls us to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15) and how will we know how to do that if we cannot experience—if we cannot feel—some of their sorrow?

Psalm 88 teaches us how to do that. Even if we don't pray it as our own experience, there is some dear brother or sister in Christ who is crying out to God like Psalm 88.

"My dear friend," Spurgeon said, "if this is your case, I want you to know that somebody else has been just where you are. Remember how the shipwrecked man upon the lonely island all of a sudden came upon the footprints of another human being? So here, on the lone island of despondency, you shall be able to trace the footprints of Another Who has been there before you. Hear how He prays." Isn't that beautiful?

Do you ever feel like you're crying out and no one is listening? Look at Psalm 88: 1-2 and you find footprints on that deserted island. Here is a worship leader—a man of God—crying out day and night. This isn't just an occasional, token prayer of someone who is going to give

religion a try, then leaves disappointed thinking, "I've been to church once or twice. I've prayed and it didn't do anything for me."

No, this is someone who trusts in the Lord—in Yahweh, the God of the covenant. This is someone who calls Him the God of his salvation; someone who has seen His mercy, who has trusted His grace. Now day and night, constantly, urgently, with intensity, he is crying out to a God Who appears hidden. A God Who hears yet remains silent.

### **Do you ever feel overwhelmed, abandoned and alone?**

Have you ever felt like that? This Psalm says you're not alone.

Look at verses 3-9. Do you ever feel overwhelmed with your trials? Do you ever feel like they are passing over you like waves and you're going to drown underneath them? That's how Heman feels. He feels so overwhelmed with his troubles that it's as if he's a doomed man. The description he gives in verses 3-5 is that it's like a living death. As far as Heman is concerned, it's like he's already been buried, has been in a graveyard for 200-300 years and no one remembers him anymore.

He's been cut off from the hand of God; he is suffering under God's heavy hand of judgment in verse six: "*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.*" We don't know precisely what the situation was that causes Heman to experience this kind of God forsakenness. He never tells us which makes this Psalm all the more penetrating for us because it can apply to so many different situations: times of depression, intense grief and sorrow or bereavement. It might be a time when you're experiencing what feels like fatherly chastisement for your sins and though you know that your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake, you wake up in the middle of the night in cold sweats as the shame of the remembrance of your sins comes back to you and haunts you once again.

It could be that Heman is going through some type of chronic, debilitating illness that just keeps battering away at his frame and affecting his mind. We don't know what the trial is but we do know that in verse seven he feels like he's drowning under overwhelming waves. Not only is he suffering the loss of livelihood and all that is dear to him—and probably the loss of health—he also is suffering the loss of companionship. In verse eight, he describes what many people who are going through intense sadness feel. They feel that the pain is so great that friends who once were close no longer know how to react. It feels like they're staring at a distance. It feels isolating. He says in verse eight: "*You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made*

*me a horror to them.*” It’s like he could see their faces that once were full of brightness in his presence but now are full of revulsion. They cannot bear to look at him any longer; the very sight of him is repugnant to them. Heman feels as if he is suffocating in this affliction. Verse eight continues, *“I am shut in so that I cannot escape.”*

In verse nine he feels like he is blinded by sorrow, *“...my eye grows dim through sorrow.”* He cries out, *“Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.”* But it’s as if he’s unheard and unheeded by God.

### **Do you ever find yourself questioning God's inaction?**

Do you ever feel that way? When you do, see the footprints and know that you’re not alone on that lonely, deserted island of despondency. In the midst of a trial, do you ever find yourself questioning what appears to be God’s inaction? In verses 10-12, Heman knows what it’s like when God does not seem to be operating on his timetable. He’s suffering greatly and feels like he’s about to die. He asks God some questions and basically is saying, “Lord, have You considered what my situation would mean to You? I’m about to die here. How will my life bring glory to You if it ends like this? What kind of praise will arise to Your name? How will this demonstrate your covenant love and faithfulness? I don’t understand, God, how You can work wonders for the dead; how the departed can rise up to praise You. I don’t understand how Your steadfast love can be declared in the grave, Your wonders known in the darkness. I don’t understand.”

Heman refuses to sanitize death. He looks at death at face value and says it is completely negative. It involves silence and severing of ties that were precious. It involves destruction, ruin, gloom and oblivion. It’s the wages of sin (Romans 6:23); it’s the stronghold of Satan whereby he holds people in fear throughout their lives. The Bible calls death the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). God’s people wrestle with death. We love life; we hate death. When we’re confronted with it, we do all that is in our power to resist it but we don’t face it without hope because we follow the footprints of the One Who has conquered death. He makes known to us the path of life (Psalm 16:11).

I heard of a dear Christian woman who suffered greatly from a chronic disability—a painful affliction. When describing the pains she had to endure, she'd always say with a smile, "It's nothing that the resurrection won't cure!"

I wonder, believer, if there's anything in your life—any difficulty to which that truth does not apply. Is there any pain, sorrow, grief or perplexity in your life that the resurrection won't cure? Praise God that the work of our Lord Jesus Christ and His resurrection from the dead give us positive answers to the questions of verses 10-12. Jesus shows us that God does work wonders for the dead. He does make wonders known in the darkness but without the resurrection there would be no resolution—no satisfying answer—to Heman's questions.

### **Do you ever become bewildered by unremitting suffering?**

As we look at verses 13-18, we see the same basic themes being repeated but Heman turns up the volume. He continues praying but he's getting no answer. In his distress, he feels as if God has turned against him (verse 14); as if God has decisively rejected him; as if he has become the object of God's wrath.

The problems remain and are a testimony to us of the fact that a godly person can experience unrelieved suffering through his or her lifetime. We don't want to face that. We don't want to deal with the fact that hardship can continue for what seems an interminable length of time. The difficulties don't always go away. God has not promised to answer all our questions; He hasn't promised to resolve all our difficulties in this life. He has promised that we will never walk alone; but He has not promised that we will never feel like we're alone. He has promised that He will never fail to care for us; but He has not promised that we will never feel at times like He doesn't care.

There will be times when we cannot reconcile what we know to be true about the character and promises of God with the misery we are enduring in our daily lives. And sometimes that gap between God's promises and our reality will feel like an unbridgeable chasm.

Heman's suffering is so great that verses 15-16 say he cannot remember a period of joy in his lifetime, *"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."* "God, I'm not finding You to be a comfort right now."

In verse 17 Heman cries, *"They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together."* He feels God's wrath is heavy upon him. And when he looks for human comfort in verse 18, he is utterly bereft; his companions are all darkness. Heman looks to his beloved and his friends. But they shun him and he says, *"...my companions have become darkness."*

Then the Psalm just ends. No praise. No light. No happy ever after. No postscript.

Who's your closest friend? When something exciting happens—when you are awarded a scholarship; when you get engaged; when you find out you're expecting a child; when you get a promotion and a raise—who would be the first person you'd want to call? Or when tragedy strikes—when you find out you have cancer; when you lose your job; when you're going through abuse; when someone dear to you dies—who do you immediately think to contact? Who is your closest friend?

Both the New International Version and the New Living Translation take the last phrase of verse 18 and translate it like this: "Darkness is my closest friend." Wow! When Heman thinks of whom to call, it's darkness. The screen fades to black. He has no one to turn to—nowhere to go—but to darkness.

What do we make of the footprints in this desolate island? Someone has been there. A believer has gone through this. Unrelieved suffering. No answers. Earnestly praying, praying, praying day and night—but silence. It seems like God is absent. You wake in the night in a cold sweat over the shameful memory of a sin you committed long ago—a sin that even though God has forgiven, you cannot forget; when you are hated and shunned—look at the footprints and see that you are not alone. That path has been walked before.

We should let Heman's lament moderate our expectations of what life in this broken world should look like. We should realize that hardship can be our lot, sometimes for a long time. A Christian philosopher who grieved over the untimely death of his own son said, "To lament is to risk living with one's deepest questions unanswered." That's reality. But in this desert island, we see footsteps that let us know that even in the desolation of this Psalm, we find a real measure of consolation. There is hope. Someone has passed this way before.

## **2. This Psalm Gives Us a Script for Voicing Unspeakable Sorrow**

I think it's generally true that we do not know how to process our grief and heartache until we find a way to put it into words. Until we can speak it—articulate it. But how do you do that? Are believers really allowed to pray like this? Has Heman gone too far? It is a fair question because times of grief always put us in jeopardy of denying our faith.

If we accuse or rebuke God of wrongdoing, if we say that God is not good, if we shake our fist in His face in defiant rage, that's an affront to His sovereignty. I heard Andrew Compton, a wise pastor, point out that when we do that, it doesn't hurt God but we actually make our own suffering worse. It's self-destructive to rebuke God, to deny His goodness and rail against His sovereignty. It brings us no comfort; it offers no satisfying answers; it ends up causing more problems than it solves and leaves us more despondent and hopeless than we were before.

But is that what Heman is doing in this Psalm? Is he railing against God and accusing God? Shaking his fist in defiant rage like an unbeliever? No! He's giving us a living example of a believer who is putting into practice Isaiah 50:10b: *"Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God."*

So how do you do that? When you're walking in darkness and you have no light, how do you trust in the name of the Lord? How do you rely on your God? Heman shows us how. His trust in God is evident in a number of ways in this Psalm.

### **He remembers Who God is and the mercies He has shown.**

We see this several times throughout this Psalm. He is Yahweh, the God of:

- salvation (verse one)
- steadfast love and covenant loyalty (*hesed*, verse 11)
- wonders and righteousness (verse 11)

So the fact that Heman is bringing his lament to God and pouring out his grief before God, instead of shaking his fist and railing against God or walking away from God, is actually an expression of trust in the Lord. Not complaining about God shows that his only help—his only hope—is in The Lord. Even though he is confused and angry, he is still speaking to God. He still trusts in a God Whose ways are inscrutable and beyond his understanding.

### **He never lets go of God's sovereignty**

Heman would vehemently disagree with Rabbi Kushner who said that bad things happen to good people and God basically has nothing to do with it. Heman would say, "Absolutely not! God is sovereign. God is in control."

Notice how many times Heman says, *"You have..."* We hear him throughout the Psalm saying, "You have done this, Lord. This is Your doing. You are the One Who governs my life. You're in control of this situation." He shows that he trusts in a sovereign God even though he doesn't understand why God is doing what He's doing.

Then in verses 10-12, Heman makes an argument before the Lord, saying, "God, how is my life going to bring You praise if You put me in the grave?" He's showing he hasn't forgotten "the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever" (Westminster Shorter Catechism). He's saying, "God, even though it's difficult for me right now, I want to praise You. I want to live for Your glory. That's why I want You to deliver me—so that I can live to Your

praise.” He wants to go on living so that he can keep on praising the Lord. Right now he's having a hard time doing it, but the desire is there.

**He keeps on praying, even though he hasn't gotten an answer to his prayer.**

Heman is like that importunate widow who keeps knocking, who keeps going before the judge, who will not give up (Luke 18:1-8). Even though he feels like God is absent, he will not give up seeking God's presence. Strangely, that's one of the brightest rays of hope in this bleak Psalm.

So the question is how should we pray when our souls seem covered in darkness? Pray like Heman did. It's alright. God is giving us a precious gift here. He's giving us permission to bring our complaint to Him. Not to complain against Him but to bring our grief, heartache and anguish to Him. To be gut-level honest with God.

It might not be safe, wise, acceptable or even appropriate to speak this way to other people but there is never any reason why we cannot be fully honest with God. After all, He knows what we're thinking anyway. Why not be honest with Him?

There is beauty in having this Psalm put in Scripture with no edits and no censoring. God didn't say, “Okay, We've got a good start here but can We please put a verse at the end that vindicates Me?” No. The fact that God allowed this Psalm to be put in the Bible just as it is, without any tidy theological bow at the end, shows us that God doesn't despise or abhor the prayers of the afflicted, pouring out their grief to Him.

We don't have to wait until we can calm down our grieving, anguished souls before we can talk to God. We don't have to tidy up our prayers. We don't have to compose a brilliant theological treatise where we reconcile the problem between God's promises and our present misery. Even though God was silent when Heman prayed, God was not deaf. He did hear this prayer! And He recorded it in His Holy Word as a testimony to us nearly 3,000 years later!

One of my favorite commentators on the Psalms, Derek Kidner says, "The very presence of these prayers in Scripture is a witness to God's understanding. He knows how men speak when they are desperate." God knows. God understands.

That's why God didn't censor this prayer. That's why He didn't clean it up and add a happy-ever-after postscript. He put this raw, visceral, teetering-on-the-edge-of-irreverence prayer in His Bible because He knows us. He understand what we're feeling when we're

overwhelmed with grief and anguish. He knows how confused and bleak and forlorn we can become. He wants us to feel safe, crying out to Him like this, bringing our grief to Him.

Even though Heman is having a hard time trusting in Him, even though Heman is disappointed and disillusioned in his grief, God is not ashamed to be Heman's God now the God of Job. God is not ashamed to be called the God of the desperate, the God of the doubting, the God of the despondent, the God of those who are driven near to despair. Your God and my God!

I was listening to Pastor Tim Keller and he said some things that I want to paraphrase into my own words here:

God is not your God because you put on a happy face every Sunday morning. God is not your God because you say all the right things to Him. God is not your God because you always respond perfectly to your troubles. He is not your God because you always hold it together.

He is your God just because He is. And because He is your God, He is strong enough to hold you when you are falling apart. He's good enough to love you when your faith is ablaze and when it's barely flickering. Even when you don't understand Him, He understands you. He can handle your weeping, your tears, your cries of anguish, your confusion, your questions, and yes, even your complaints. He—the God and Father of your Lord Jesus Christ—is the One Person with Whom you can pour out the depths of your soul and know that He will not reject you for it. He will not shun you.

Sometimes the highest act of worship we can bring is to groan before the Lord, to join with all creation as the Spirit of adoption works within our hearts as we look at a world that is broken. We live in a world where things are not the way they are supposed to be and it's okay to lift up groans from the depths of our being that say, "Oh Lord, this world is a mess but my hope is in You. My only hope is You, Lord!"

He would rather hear us groaning before Him than to see us going away from Him. God doesn't want us to accept this world as it is. There is unspeakable suffering in this world but this Psalm teaches us how to give voice to our sorrows, how to join with all creation in Spirit-inspired groaning as we wait for the redemption of our bodies and the renewal of all creation.

This Psalm gives us a script that gives voice to our sorrows.

### **3. This Psalm Serves as a Signpost, Pointing to a Light the Darkness Cannot Extinguish**

Psalm 88 ends with darkness but thankfully the Bible does not end with darkness. Psalm 88 is not the end of the Bible. If you follow the footprints long enough, you will find that you are not alone nor are you lost in the darkness. You are being led by an experienced Guide. God has

a plan; He has a purpose. He is working that purpose out even in the darkness. That's what we're remembering this advent season.

Isaiah the prophet speaks of the unfolding of God's purposes like this: *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwell in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone"* (Isaiah 9:2). We feel like we're in the deepest darkness, then suddenly, off on the horizon, there's a Light. That Light dawned in a dark and bleak place, in a manger in Bethlehem—in a feeding trough for cattle. We saw the fullness of God in a helpless babe. The Gospel of John says, *"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"* (John 1:4-5).

All the darkness in this world cannot extinguish this Light: not in the bleakness of the manger; not under the dark rage of Herod's persecution; not in the dark wilderness of Satan's temptations; not the darkness of agony in the Garden of Gethsemane; not even in the God-forsaken agony of the cross when our Savior cried out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27:46). What Heman dreaded to experience, our Savior actually endured for His people who would trust in Him.

For a moment, it seemed that...

Light of the world by darkness slain;  
Then bursting forth in glorious day,  
Up from the grave He rose again!

(In Christ Alone by Keith Getty & Stuart Townend)

Acts 2:24 declares, *"God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."* He shows us there's nothing the resurrection cannot cure. The Light shines in the darkness; the darkness has not overcome it.

So as we read Psalm 88 and follow its footprints, we see a signpost pointing us to the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. We see a signpost pointing us to the One Man Who can answer the questions of verses 10-12 definitely and triumphantly! When we read Psalm 88, we can hear the voice of our Savior saying, "I've been there. I've been down to the pit. I've been set loose among the dead and I've been submerged under the waves of God's wrath for you. My resurrection is proof that God does work wonders for the dead! The departed do rise up to praise Him! I will make My wonders known in the land of darkness!"

We're not lost. We're not alone. We can see that we're being led through the wilderness of our sufferings; through the dark valley. We're being led by an experienced Guide. A Guide Who shines in the darkness. Emmanuel Who came to,

Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight!

(O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, an 8<sup>th</sup> Century antiphonal chant;  
translated into English by John M. Neal, 1851)

We can say of Jesus what Psalm 139:12 says, "*...even the darkness is not dark to you [Jesus]; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you*" (Psalm 139:12).

As I was thinking about this Psalm, I remembered going with our church youth group to Lookout Mountain back in 2004. Along a road there in George was a little entrance to a cave. It was so nondescript I would have never even known it was there had we not had a tour guide—a spelunker—to take us down into that cave. I would never have gotten on my hands and knees and crawled through that dark, narrow space had I not been with a group of teenagers whom I felt obliged to impress. But they were there, watching me so I had to be brave. I crawled and crawled and crawled. It went darker and darker as I went deeper and deeper into that cave. I hated every moment of it.

Then our guide got us all down into the regions dark and deep and she said, "Turn off your flashlights." Ahhhh! I so desperately wanted to leave it on! But everyone else turned theirs off and so did I. The darkness was so thick it was suffocating. I couldn't see my own hand in front of my face. I couldn't wait for the moment when she said, "Okay, turn on your flashlights."

Nothing would have been more terrifying than to find out the batteries had failed or the switch was broken. I would have been buried down there and you never would have met me had that happened. Without light, we would never have gotten out of the depths of the cave, out of the dark, deep regions of that cave. We would have been remembered no more!

That leaves me with a question for you. When death's dark shadows start to descend on your life and the darkness closes in around you—and it will—and all your lights are becoming dark, do you have a Companion Who will not become darkness? Do you have a Friend Who is a Light that cannot be extinguished by death?

Some people say, "Christianity is just the sentimentality of the naïve. Christians don't want to face the hardships of life and are just looking for some type of opiate to make getting through life easier. Christians want to act like everything is happy, happy, happy all the time. That's fine for those weak-minded people but I prefer to be realistic. I prefer to face the darkness head on."

I would argue that that's like crawling into a deep, deep, deep cave with a flashlight whose batteries are about to die. The alternative to Christianity is not realism—it's nihilism; despair; utter, unquenchable darkness. Christianity is bracingly realistic about the hardships of life in this dark world. Christianity is not sentimental; it's real. It does not hide its face from human sorrow. It does not pretend that everything is happy in this life. It does not refuse to

face the difficulties and hardships. The testimony of Psalm 88 is that we have a faith that is real; a faith that can face the darkness with hope because there is a Light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot extinguish it.

As we look forward to the coming of that Light into our dark world, I plead with you to come to the Light. Do not hide in the shadows. Do not light your own fire and think you can get through life with your own torch. Put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ Who came to be light in this dark world.

Let's praise Him together.

Lord Jesus, we thank You that You came as the love-gift of Your Father Who has now become our Father in heaven through faith in You. Lord Jesus, I pray for those who walk in darkness right now and have no light. Come Thou Dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by Your advent here. Would You disperse the gloomy clouds of night? Would You take death's dark shadow and put it to flight? Would You let Your people who trust in Your name, rejoice that You, Emmanuel, have come to us. For any who right now are walking according to their own light and who do not know You and trust in You, I pray that You would shine Your light into hearts of men and women, boys and girls, right now and give them the light of the knowledge of Your glory in the face of Jesus Christ. Enable us to repent of our sins and put our trust in You, the Light of the world. We love You Lord and give You our praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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## **New Covenant Bible Church**

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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