

## Spiritual Rhythm

Online Sermon:

[http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page\\_id=3567](http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567)

The following sermon series is based on Mark Buchanan's book, *Spiritual Rhythm: Being with Jesus Every Season of Your Soul*. There are seasons or "cycles of the heart" that each of us either by our own choices or more often due to "chance happening to everyone" that we must go through in life. There will be times of "flourishing and fruitful, stark and dismal, cool and windy, and everything in between" (15).<sup>1</sup> It is not from our



"business," the kind of service that tries to outperform others to "make one shine" that bears fruit. Human effort alone is always the dust's feeble attempt to produce more than mere filthy rags! It is only by knowing and faithfully

keeping in step with the Holy Spirit that we can produce the fruits talked about in Galatians of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (5:22). If we invite the Man of all Seasons, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2), our sympathetic high priest Jesus (4:14-16) into the "season for every activity under

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<sup>1</sup> Any references with just a page number comes from Mark Buchanan's book.

heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1) then the eternity that God has placed in our hearts (3:11) will always be met with joy through the transformative power of His grace and mercy! The "seasons" in this sermon are not defined as birth, youth, middle and old age but instead as four distinct set of circumstances that believers inevitably face living in this fallen world that is not our home (Hebrews 13:14-16): winter, spring, summer, and fall.

### Winter: Darkness my Closest Friend?

#### Psalms 88

Of all the seasons winter is the most difficult one to endure. It is "bleak, and cold, and dark, and fruitless. It is a time of inactivity, unwelcomed brooding, more night than day.



Most things are dead, or appear so," (29) and worst of all it never seems to never end! It often represents a "dark night of soul" for contained within its cold, desperate, lonely drapery one finds the pain and anguish so unbearable that one wonders if one

will ever feel pleasure again. It is during these kinds of tribulations that one often feels like either one has wandered too far from God to be found or God found one so despicable

that He abandoned one to live the rest of one's life in misery, never to see the Son shine again! It is in the deep, dark valleys of tribulations that we out of self-pity and utter foolishness wonder: "if God truly loved me then I would not be here" (29)! It is in our brokenness that we most often cry out with Solomon, "meaningless, meaningless" (Ecclesiastes 2), for if our attempts to be holy merely result in frustration, anguish, and unbearable pain then how can all of one's life be worth living?

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*When pain swallows up and blinds one to the "sunshine of pleasure" one once had then "ambition, accomplishment, aspiration, beauty, and courage become but a distant memory or worse, yet an antagonizing reembrace of what has been lost!"*

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The greater the crucible of affliction the more likely blindness, sorrow, pain and self-pity sets in that is so intense that life seems not only meaningless, but darkness becomes our closest friend! Psalms 88 was written by the Sons of Korah that is so intense with agony and sorrow that the scholar Walter Brueggemann calls this Psalm, "an embarrassment to conventional faith" (33)! Let's read the passage slowly and carefully for contained within it are some very raw emotions of one experiencing a dark night of the soul.

**"LORD, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you.**

**2 May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.**

**3 I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death.**

**4 I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength.**

**5 I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.**

**6 You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.**

**7 Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.**

**8 You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape;**

**9 my eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you.**

**10 Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do their spirits rise up and praise you?**

**11 Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction?**

**12 Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?**

**13 But I cry to you for help, LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you.**

**14 Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?**

**15 From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair.**

**16 Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me.**

**17 All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.**

**18 You have taken from me friend and neighbor — darkness is my closest friend.”**

While I could easily write a book concerning this Psalm, I would like to highlight a couple of points in relation to winter. First, since the Sons of Korah wrote other Psalms that praised and expressed thankfulness and joy in knowing God, Psalms 88 shows that despite our spiritual level winter can result in experiencing a variety of negative emotions and many untruths.



The Psalmist felt his “life was near to death” (5) and that he had been placed in the lowest and darkest pit by none other than God Himself (6). Feeling utterly powerless to escape (8) he cries out to the Lord whose wrath he believes has swept over him and His terrors have destroyed him (16).

Winter can make one feel like one has never tasted nor will ever taste again God’s grace, mercy, and peace. And secondly, winter is often when one feels most “abandoned, rejected, isolated” (35) and without any friends. It is not platitudes of “better days” or judgment and “repulsiveness” of our “apparent” sins that a winter traveler needs to hear most but friendship from fellow sufferers who

without condemnation but in genuine love wants to share the comfort they have received from Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3-11)!

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*In winter we need those who have travelled this lonely, painful journey and have come out the other side to help ease the pain-stricken and broken by reintroducing them to the Great Physician who can heal all wounds and free the captives from any calamity!*

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### **Winter Activities**

And yet though winter be long, arduous, painful, lonely it need not be filled with despair for there is much a believer can do to redeem this season.

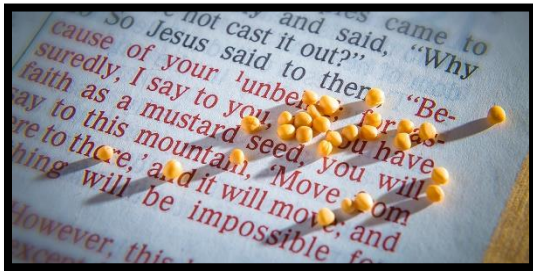
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*While the Psalmist finishes by stating that God had abandoned him to the lowest, darkest pit (6), set apart with the dead (5) and the infamous line, “darkness is my closest friend” (18); don’t lose sight of earnest prayers to be saved by the same God he had wrote so many times before with praise, thanksgiving, and joy!*

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In his brokenness, pain, and suffering, in incredible faith and boldness the Psalmist states “Lord, you are the God who saves

me; day and night I cry out to You” (1). Dont underestimate how difficult it is to pray and believe when sight says otherwise! When one feels like they are being drug down into the pit their prayers in their own ears often sound “rote, trite,



mechanical, and often one fights down an inner voice that mocks, declaring such words as being an exercise in futility, putting band-aids on

mortal wounds, singing lullabies to breaking hearts, crossing fingers as the sky falls” (46). And yet one finds that even faith as tiny as a mustard seed can move this mighty mountain of disbelief (Matthew 17:14-21) and yes one can boldly offer a sweet fragrance to He who can do more than one could ever ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). While little grows in the wintertime, there truly is no other season that faith grows so strong and beautifully in the name and power of our resurrected Lord! When we believe by faith and not sight that the Lord of all seasons will always do good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28) then prayer ceases to be the hopeful but futile words of one desperate to hang onto anything or anyone but instead becomes the joyful words of the fallen about being restored or at very least comforted by the One who gives all life in abundance!

Another work that is best done in winter is the act of pruning. It always amazes me how one can cut off the dying branches of a plant or tree and though it initially looks quite dreadful later it becomes flush and bears much fruit (47).

There are many examples of “spiritual giants” in the Bible who despite their closeness to God still felt the need to prune the imperfections out of their lives. Even though king David was so close to God that He was called “a man after God’s own heart” (Acts 13:22), in Psalms 139 he cries out, “search me, God, and know my heart, test me, and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me



in the way everlasting” (24-25). When the prophet Haggai was called by God to convince Israel to start rebuilding the temple and stop putting all their resources into fixing their homes God told them the

following, “give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvest little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it” (5-6).

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*Winter is the best time to examine our lives to see if there has crept in any activity that we think is holy but in the end is bearing little or no fruit.*

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We all have spiritual gifts and have been assigned divine tasks to accomplish in God’s kingdom. It is only when we faithfully

prune out all activities not ordained and blessed by God that one is freed up to give all of one's effort to God's will and in turn bears much fruit. And while cutting away what little that remains seems impossible and utterly dismal remember "though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). Take a leap of faith and remove what is dying to embrace God's holy, perfect and pleasing will for your life (Romans 12:2).

Another work that is done in winter is learning to wait upon the Lord. Going back to Psalms 88 we can almost feel the anguish as he cried out to God to save him from his dark night of the soul. Though his eyes were growing dim with



grief (9) from the terrors that engulfed him (17), morning (13), day and night he waited and cried out to the Lord (1) for divine deliverance. Living in a society that is fast-paced and geared towards instant satisfaction makes it very hard to helplessly wait for deliverance when the winter's icy, painful storms rage all around us. It is in winter that "we pray, call out, spread our hands" (51) and often God seems "indifferent, absent or

even opposed" to our deliverance. We wonder how long must I suffer only to have our prayers met with silence? And yet it is in winter when we have grown weary and tired that we learn that "those who put their hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and

not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:31)! While in the loneliness and anguish of winter darkness seems to be our closest friend this is far from true for the Man of all Seasons, especially sorrow, has never left or forsaken but in silence has chosen to invite the weary to trade yokes with Him (Matthew 11:28-30), be sheltered under His wings (Psalms 91:4) and be carried upon His shoulders. Though we often don't see God in the winter, yet we love Him (1 Peter 1:8)!

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*We walk not by sight but by utter belief in Him that out of His goodness and mercy even in the most painful of winters we can be filled with inexpressible and glorious joy that no matter now dark the land might become we are have every spiritual blessing in our Lord and have been sealed by the Holy Spirit to spend and eternity with our Him (Ephesians 1:3, 13-14)!*

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And finally, one of the most joyful activities of winter is reflection on those things unseen. The barren lands that excel in loneliness and pain are often the best to "break our addiction to this world" (55) and all its ways. In winter how "we long for, not death, but what takes death's sting away, and makes earth's many trials seem light and momentary" (55). When like the disciples we cry out "Lord don't you care if we drown?" we get to hear His precious response, "Why are you so afraid" (Mark 4:38, 40)? Is not He who has walked on water, casted out demons, healed the blind and lame, and atoned for our sins on the cross more than able to be the rock of

our salvation, a mighty fortress that cannot be shaken (Psalms 62:1-2)? Though we face death all day long in these jars of clay that are so easily broken, it is precisely in winter that Apostle Paul's words ring the loudest and with greatest joy, "for I am convinced that neither death nor life neither angels



nor demons, neither present nor 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" (Romans 8:38-39). In the face of the harshest of winters we learn that death has lost its victory and its sting (1 Corinthians 15:55-56) for the pain and anguish of the broken and downtrodden is nothing compared to "the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18)! So even in the winter we will put on the full armour of God (Ephesians 6:10-17) and venture into a land not our home to sing carols of God's grace and mercy as we look upward and forward too spending eternity in His glorious presence!