

**Biblical Counseling and  
“The Dark Night of the Soul”  
(Psalm 88)**

**If Heman Saw Two *Very Different* Counselors!**

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## Heman's Two *Very Different* Counselors

Psalm 88 is known as “the Psalm of the Dark Night of the Soul.” It is the most lament-filled psalm of all the lament psalms.

Imagine if Heman were seen by a counselor, or a soul physician, or a spiritual friend today. How might that person respond to, react to, and interact with Heman—and with Heman's despairing lament?

Well, recently, I did just that. I imagined two scenarios, two vignettes, two dialogues where two very different “counselors/comforters” “ministered” to Heman.

This manuscript combines those two RPM Ministries *Truth & Love* blog posts. You can find, read, and share those two posts here:

[\*If Heman Saw a Miserable Counselor.\*](#) Imagine with me if Heman in Psalm 88 were to share his soul with a soulless counselor...

[\*If Heman Saw a Comforting Counselor.\*](#) Imagine with me if Heman in Psalm 88 were to share his soul with a biblical soul physician, with a compassionate soul care giver...

## Part 1

### If Heman Saw a Miserable Counselor

#### Job's Miserable Comforters

After thirteen chapters of confrontation over his suffering, Job had had enough.

“Then Job replied:

I have heard many things like these;  
you are miserable comforters, all of you!

Will your long-winded speeches never end?  
What ails you that you keep on arguing?

I also could speak like you,  
if you were in my place;  
I could make fine speeches against you  
and shake my head at you.

But my mouth would encourage you;  
comfort from my lips would bring you relief” ([Job 16:1-5](#)).

#### If Heman Were to Visit a Miserable Counselor...

Reflecting on Job's experience, I started wondering what it might sound like, and be like, if Heman—the human author of Psalm 88—visited a miserable counselor. In his Psalm, often called “The Psalm of the Dark Night of the Soul,” Heman lays bare to God his suffering, pain, abuse, and trauma.

Heman *faces his suffering face-to-face with his Father*.

#### Sharing Our Soul with a Miserable Comforter

Imagine with me if Heman in [Psalm 88](#) were to share his soul with a soulless counselor...

Of course, no one would really counsel exactly like what you're going to read in the rest of this post. So consider this “Christian Satire,” somewhat like *The Babylon Bee*.

**Miserable Comforter (MC):** “I've read your *Personal Information Form*. We have a *lot* of Scripture to look at, that's for sure! But before we apply God's Word to your behavior, summarize for me in a sentence or two what your presenting problem is.”

**Heman:** “Maybe I can start by sharing with you what I shared recently with God.

'LORD, you are the God who saves me;  
day and night I cry out to you.  
May my prayer come before you;  
turn your ear to my cry.'"

**MC:** "So, you have that half right. You started well. You prayed to God, called Him Lord, and said He's your Savior.

But here's your problem as I see it—well, as *God's Word* sees it. You relate to God *emotionally instead of responsibly*. You seem *fixated on feelings*—crying day and night, asking God to listen to your crying. We'll talk more about this, but it's clear already that a large part of our focus will be looking at the Bible to see how you can put off a feeling orientation and put on an obedience orientation."

**Heman:** "But I am overwhelmed with troubles. My life draws near to death...."

**MC:** "Let me stop you right there, in love. Let me just say, '*Stop it!*' Let's look at a central verse that you need to memorize and apply: 1 Corinthians 10:13. I'll read it for you from the King James Version.

'There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also *make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*'

You see, you started with the word 'but.' You left out the most important word: 'God.' What if you had said, '*But God*'? That's why you said you were *overwhelmed* with trouble. You have a trouble-orientation. You need a God-orientation. Once you have that mindset, then you'll put off saying 'overwhelmed' and you'll put on saying 'I *can* bear this; I can *suffer well* because God is faithful!'"

**Heman:** "But..."

**MC:** "Let me stop you again. You're back to that 'But' stuff. Start with 'But God!'"

**Heman:** "Um. OK.... But God, I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength."

**MC:** "I'm glad you added 'God' back in, but we need to add God in *biblically*. Have you applied Philippians 4:13 to your attitude and actions? 'I can do *all* things through Christ which strengtheneth me.'"

**Heman:** "Perhaps I'm not communicating clearly. It doesn't seem like I can be strengthened by Christ because it seems like I'm a corpse. Maybe if I shared with you what I wrote in my prayer journal to God..."

'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. You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.'

**MC:** "Heman, thank you for sharing. This helps me to see your sin problem. Now you are communicating clearly. You have to stop complaining. The Bible calls complaint 'sin.' But don't take my word for it, take God's Word for it. Hear God's Word from Numbers 11:1.

'And when the people complained, it displeased the LORD: and the LORD heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the LORD burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp.'

This is why God's wrath lies heavily upon you. Because of your sin of complaining. *But God* says that if you confess your sin He is faithful and just to forgive you your sin and to cleanse you from all your complaining unrighteousness—let's turn to that now in 1 John..."

**Heman:** "I do want to be sure my heart is right with God. It just seems like He has taken from me my closest friends, and has made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape..."

**MC:** "Before you continue, I see another sin issue you have. You are a people-pleaser and you have made having friends an idol of your heart. You care too much about whether they like you or think you are repulsive. Don't take stuff like that personally.

And, again, you're saying that you can't escape. But what did we *just* read about God *always* providing a way to escape? And what did we just say about the way to escape? Confess your sin of people-pleasing, idolatry, and worrying about how people see you. Memorize Proverbs 28:13, because it tells you the *root* of your problem—*unconfessed and unforsaken sin*.

'He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.'

And now I'm seeing another sin problem you have. You've been infiltrated by mysticism. You're talking about the 'darkest depths.' That sounds like that mystical stuff about *the Dark Night of the Soul*. You need to confess your sin of mysticism."

**Heman:** "Is this all about *sin*? I thought it was about my suffering and grief. Like I said to God recently, 'My eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you.'"

**MC:** "Sure. Suffering is important. I wrote a blog post on it once and did a podcast about it. I titled the blog, *Suffer Well!* I'll send you a link so you can apply it to your life.

It's good that you're calling out to God. I'm not quite so sure about that spreading out your hands—that could get too emotive, but the rest is OK, as long as you *suffer well* which means putting off complaining and putting on growing like Christ in your suffering...

I wonder, too, about all your talk about crying. Perhaps you are depressed. You do know, right, that depression is a sin? I have a pamphlet on that which I will give you."

**Heman:** "Well, I remember reading about Christ in the Garden sharing His soul with His Father and being brutally honest about His feelings..."

**MC:** "Yes, Jesus shared with His Father in the Garden. I'm glad you brought that up. *But* we have to interpret the Bible *biblically, not emotionally*. Jesus put *faith before feelings; He put obedience above emotions*.

Jesus said, 'Not my will, but Yours be done.' Be like Jesus—eschew a feeling orientation and partake in a faith orientation, then you'll see your supposed 'emotional problems' for what they are—a *sinful lack of responsible obedience*. Let me make a note to give you my chart on *The Emotion Train* about Facts→Faith→Feelings.

Now, what were you saying...?"

**Heman:** "I was trying to share with you about my suffering. Here's something else I wrote to God in my prayer journal.

'Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do their spirits rise up and praise you? Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?'"

**MC:** "I hear what you're saying. Here's your problem. You've been influenced by a worldly, psychological, man-centered way of thinking. The *world says*, 'What happens *to you* is your problem.' But *the Word*—God's sufficient Word—says, 'How you *obediently respond* to what happens to you is either the solution or the problem—depending on whether you suffer well or suffer in an ungodly, immature way.

You keep looking at your problems and blaming them. You need to start looking at your personal guilt.

That reminds me, be sure I give you our homework assignment on *Distinguishing Between the World's Idea of Guilty Feelings and God's Truth About Your True Guilt*."

**Heman:** "That sounds like a LOT of homework. A lot of my 'homework' is prayer journaling, like the psalmists did. Here's something I wrote recently.

'But I cry to you for help, LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me? From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair. Your

wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.”

**MC:** “You mentioned the Psalms. Maybe instead of making up your own psalms, you should apply a psalm like Psalm 23 where David, inspired by God, said that *even if he walks through the valley of the shadow of death, he would fear no evil.*”

Did I mention that fear is a sin? I know I mentioned that complaining is a sin—and your journal entry is filled with complaining—sinful, irresponsible, guilty complaining.

And another thing, you haven’t been reading *trauma-informed* stuff, have you? It sure sounds like it when you talk about ‘terrors leading to despair.’ I hope you’re not blaming it on the brain. I pray you are not saying your body keeps the score. This is about your soul. Your soul is what’s important. And, *responsible obedience*, of course, is most important.”

**Heman:** “I’ve never even heard of *trauma-informed*. But I have read [scores of Bible passages](#) about how God fearfully and wonderfully designed us as a complex combination and interrelationship between body and soul. Perhaps that’s what you mean? All I know is it seems like God has taken from me friend and neighbor—*darkness is my closest friend.*”

**MC:** “There you go again—friends becoming the idol of your heart. We’re definitely identifying a habitual behavioral pattern that you’ll have to put off. But enough about that, for now.

You need hope! You said, ‘darkness is your closest friend.’ Write this down. Go ahead. Write this down right now:

*Make God your closest FRIEND and you’ll never feel hopeless again.”*

**Heman:** “I *do* understand what the Bible says about hope. And I *do* want to hope in God. But right now I feel *so* hopeless. Can’t you see that?”

**MC:** “I see what you’re doing. You want me to empathize with you. I’ll make a note to give you a pamphlet on *Empathy Is Sin*.

You don’t need empathy. You need confrontation. Empathy joins you in your sinful hopelessness. Confrontation joins Christ in confronting you out of concern so you can change from hopelessness to hope.

I mean, think about it. Your journal entry ends with the words, ‘darkness is my closest friend.’ No **biblical** Psalm would *ever* end with words like *that!*”

**Heman:** “I...”

**MC:** “Sorry to interrupt you, but our time is about up. Let’s schedule our next five appointments. I’m sure we can fix all of your sin issues in a total of six weeks.

Now, let's pray, thanking God for all the helpful biblical truths about your sin that you've been able to learn today from God's Word. And let's pray that you'll start taking biblical responsibility so you can suffer well and live an obedient life, not an emotional life...."

### **My Audience**

Who is my audience for Part 1? In a word: "sufferers." In another word, "Hagar." Mistreated, suffering, abused, Hagar was ministered to by God. Hagar praised God saying,

*"I have now seen the God who sees me"* ([Genesis 16:13](#)).

If you are suffering, I want you to remember, *God sees you; God cares; God is the Father of compassion*. God sees Hagar. God sees Heman. God sees you.

God sees you **not** with a **monocle**—not with one eye that looks only through the lens of sin, guilt, and responsibility. God sees you with **bifocals**. God sees your suffering. God sees you being sinned against. God sees you living in a fallen, dangerous, abusive world. As Frank Lake said in the 1960s:

*"Pastoral care is defective unless it can deal thoroughly **both** with the evils we have suffered as well as with the sins we have committed."*

The Bible's biblical counseling has bifocals. It is not myopic. It looks at saints as *sufferers* and as sons and daughters who struggle against *sin*. The Bible offers grace to help saints who suffer and who struggle against sin.

I crafted today's post for sufferers, for people struggling with depression, anxiety, fear, for people dealing with living in a fallen world and dealing with the trauma of abuse, for people who are groaning under the weight of a broken world. I crafted today's post to remind *you* that the Trinity sees *you*. The Spirit sees and groans with you ([Romans 8:26-27](#)). The Son sees and empathizes with you ([Hebrews 4:14-16](#)). The Father of compassion sees and comforts you ([2 Corinthians 1:3-5](#)).

### **A Positive Approach**

How do we address and correct this type of counseling? Answering this question is my focus in the book, [Consider Your Counsel: Addressing Ten Mistakes in Our Biblical Counseling](#).

### **Some Additional Resources on Job's Counselors, Psalm 88, Psalms of Lament, Grief, Suffering, and God's Healing Hope**

Here are a few additional resources—one's that will model a very different approach to biblical comforting than was modeled in today's post about miserable counselors.



- For a post about Job's counselors and their *monocled view of people*, see Paul Tautges' post, [How to Be a Miserable Comforter](#).
- Here at RPM Ministries Truth & Love blog site, I've posted about, [How to Be a Miserable, Non-Empathetic Comforter](#) from the book of Job.
- For a post from the *Center for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship* and Brent Osterberg, see, [Three Reasons to Be Grateful That Psalm 88 Is in Your Bible](#).
- [Praying Psalm 88: Cries from the Pit](#) by Stefan Nitzschke and Faith Counseling Ministries outlines five truths in times of trouble from Psalm 88.
- From the Biblical Counseling Coalition and Kyle Johnston we find a very helpful blog about Psalm 88, [Persevering Through Sorrow in Prayer](#).
- Paul Tripp shares about Psalm 88 in his article, [A Psalm That Has No Hope](#).
- Christina Fox at The Gospel Coalition shares about Psalm 88 in, [How I Gleaned Hope from the Darkest Psalm](#).
- Jonthan Parnell, at *Desiring God* discusses Psalm 88 in, [Worship in the Dark](#).
- For convenience sake, here are links to my two-part series on Psalm 88. First, [If Heman Saw a Miserable Counselor](#). And second, [If Heman Saw a Comforting Counselor](#).
- In [Models of Lament](#), Ernie Baker and Dale Johnson talk candidly and helpfully about how Christians and how biblical counselors can apply lament psalms.
- I've authored three books directly related to grief, suffering, lament, and Christ's healing hope: [3 Resources for Experiencing God's Healing Hope: A Trilogy on Grieving with Hope](#).
- I've collated an annotated bibliography of [14 Biblical Counseling Resources on Grief and Comforting the Grieving](#).

## **Join the Conversation**

### **Questions for Discussion and Application**

As friends, one-another ministers, or biblical counselors, we'd all like to think that, "I would *never* minister to a person like Job's miserable counselors, or like the vignette in Bob's post!" But, let's be honest, we are imperfect—only Christ is the "Wonderful Counselor."

So, let's use this article on "how *not* to comfort/counsel" as a way of *considering our counsel* and addressing possible mistakes in our ministry to others.

1. Have you ever had someone like Job's "miserable comforters" speak to you in the middle of your suffering? In your suffering, have you ever had someone speak to you like the vignette I shared above? If so, what was it like? How did it impact you? What would you have wanted from them instead?
  
2. Have you ever, regretfully, ministered to a hurting person like Job's "miserable comforters"? If so, why do you think you fell into that trap of non-comforting counsel?
  
3. Have you experienced a "dark night of the soul" like Heman? If so, did you lament to God? Or, did you "stuff it" and "fake it" because you thought or were taught that Christians don't feel bad and don't talk about their pain and suffering?
  
4. Our "imagined comforter," our "MC" ("Miserable Comforter"), denied Heman's emotions, diminished his feelings, and shamed Heman for his pain and suffering. What is your biblical understanding of how God fearfully and wonderfully made us as emotional beings? What is your biblical understanding of feelings and emotions as a valid aspect of the Christian life?
  
5. MC confused lament and complaint. What is your biblical understanding of lament—of honestly expressing our pain and suffering face-to-face with our heavenly Father? Biblically, how is lament different from complaint?
  
6. What is your biblical understanding of grief, pain, suffering, and trauma? To what biblical passages would you turn to develop a biblical "sufferology"—a biblical understanding of suffering and a biblical approach to ministering to those who are suffering?

7. MC used the phrase “suffering well” to condemn Heman for his lament. Going along with the previous question, what does the Bible teach and what do biblical characters model about the nature of honest, candid suffering in our fallen world?
8. MC misused Scripture to shame and condemn Heman for being overwhelmed. How could Paul’s expressions in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, the biblical truths of Romans 8:20-27; and the lament psalms provide a different, more biblical, more compassionate understanding of the difficulties of life in our fallen world?
9. In what ways is MC *unlike* our Father of compassion and God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3-4), unlike Christ our sympathetic High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16), and unlike our groaning Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26-27)?
10. MC, like Job’s miserable comforters, confused suffering with sin—*confronting* Job and Heman about imagined personal sin, rather than *comforting* Job and Heman in their suffering. As a spiritual friend, one-another minister, or biblical counselor, how do you seek to discern between issues of personal sin and issues of personal suffering? How could the comprehensive biblical concept of seeing believers as *saints who suffer and battle against sin on their sanctification journey* help you to minister appropriately to people like Job and Heman?
11. MC and Heman interacted about Jesus’s raw and real experiences in the Garden of Gethsemane. What does Jesus, the perfect God-man, teach us about the candid expression of emotions and about lamenting to the Father?
12. MC believes that “empathy is sin.” What is your biblical understanding of empathy, sympathy, comfort, compassion, weeping with those who weep, and suffering with those who suffer?
13. In “Part 2,” we’ll look at how a comforting counselor might lovingly, compassionately interact with Heman. Before you read Part 2, what would *you* do differently than MC in your ministry to Heman? How would *you* respond to Heman with biblical comfort and compassion?

14. Imagine if you were MC's counseling supervisor. You've just listened to a recording of this session with MC and Heman. How would you begin to provide feedback to MC? How would you help MC to explore the approach MC took? What biblical passages and principles of one-another care would you examine with MC?

## Part 2

### If Heman Saw a Comforting Counselor

#### Imagine If...

In Part 1, I asked you to imagine with me if Heman in Psalm 88 were to share his soul with a soulless counselor. While there is much we can learn from bad examples about what *not* to do and say, and how *not* to counsel, there's also much we can learn from good examples. So, in Part 2, I'm asking you to:

*Imagine with me if Heman in [Psalm 88](#) were to share his soul with a biblical soul physician, with a compassionate soul care giver.*

What might it be like for a human counselor to offer Heman a taste of the Father's divine counsel—our Father of compassion and God of all comfort ([2 Corinthians 1:3-4](#))?

#### Some Initial Relational Reflections...

Of course, there is *no one-size-fits-all* approach to caring for a hurting person like Heman. So the following imagined dialogue or vignette is simply *one way* a compassionate biblical counseling conversation with Heman might begin...

While compassionate listening is always vital, being an initial session it is especially important to hear Heman's situational story and soul story. And in doing this, we want to focus not simply on [data collection, but even more on soul connection](#) ([1 Thessalonians 2:7-8](#)).

In this session, and throughout every meeting with Heman, we want to do [dual listening](#). We want to listen empathetically to Heman's *earthly story of suffering and hurt*, while listening *together* to and carefully weaving in *God's eternal, heavenly story of hope and help* ([Philippians 1:9-11](#)).

#### Heman Sees a Comforting Counselor

**Comforting Comforter (CC):** "Heman, I'm honored that you would seek me out as someone to care for your soul during this very difficult time in your life. I know you wouldn't highlight any of this, because you're a humble man, but I know a bit about you and your background. Your great-grandmother is Hannah ([1 Chronicles 6:33](#)), who prayed to the Lord for the birth of your grandfather Samuel ([1 Samuel 1](#)). You have the godly reputation as one of the wisest men of your generation ([1 Kings 4:31](#)). You've served as the king's biblical counselor ([1 Chronicles 25:5](#)). You serve King David as the worship leader in the house of the LORD, and your godly sons serve with you ([1 Chronicles 6:31-33](#)).

Heman, I don't say any of this to 'give you a big head.' Instead, I'm sharing this to say that I don't see myself as 'the expert answer-man' and you as the 'novice,' or 'rookie.' I see you as a mature man of God. Because of my respect for your biblical wisdom, I see my role, in part, as fanning into flame the gift of God within you ([2 Timothy 1:6](#)) and drawing out of you scriptural wisdom for living ([Acts 17:11](#))—for experiencing God in the midst of incredibly hard times and difficult emotions ([Ephesians 3:17-19](#))."

**Heman:** "Thank you for saying that. For all my 'godliness and wisdom,' everything seems a mess right now. I need and want *your* biblical insights to help me navigate all that I'm going through..."

**CC:** "I appreciate that, Heman. If it's OK with you, could we both pray before we continue? I'll use your [Biblical Counseling Goals and Focus Form](#) to guide my prayer for you..."

**Heman and CC:** Both pray...

**CC:** "Heman, thank you for your candor in filling out your *Goals and Focus Form*. There's plenty for us to share about together and to explore together through God's Word. I wonder if you could put into words a brief summary of how I might best be of help to you as you *wrestle through* all of this *with God*..."

**Heman:** "I want someone to walk through all of this with me so I can walk through all of this with God. I was praying this morning, while thinking of all the pain and suffering I'm experiencing, and I shared this with God.

'LORD, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.'"

**CC:** "Wow! From what you've shared in your *Goals and Focus Form*, I know a bit about what you're going through. And for you to keep God in the middle of all of this is amazing!

There's a phrase that people use sometimes—*Coram Deo*—meaning living all of life face-to-face with our heavenly Father. That's what you're doing—you're inviting God into the center of your situation, the center of your soul.

I love your words, 'LORD, you are the God who saves me.' Could you tell me more about how you see God as *Yahweh Elohim who delivers you* and some of the biblical passages that help you to see God this way?"

**Heman:** Hemans shares more about his biblical view of God, and Heman and CC explore together central biblical passages that Heman highlights...

**CC:** "That's such a tremendous scriptural foundation for you as you face all of this, Heman. You are grounding your suffering and your emotions *in God and His goodness*.

I also really appreciate how you're *crying out to God*. Philip Yancey used to say,

'We can be disappointed *without* God, or we can be disappointed *with* God.'

You clearly are taking your disappointment *to* God. You know better than I do, Heman, that God invites our lament. And that's what you're doing—lamenting *to* God.

Could you help me to understand a bit more about what you're going through, your lament, your pain, your suffering...?"

**Heman:** "Um, how *candid* do you want me to be?"

**CC:** "Have at it."

**Heman:** "Well, here goes. Here's what it seems like.

I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength. 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."

**CC:** Sits in silence with Heman as Heman shares further and as Heman weeps...

**CC and Heman:** CC draws out Heman as Heman shares more about feeling overwhelmed, as he shares his troubles, as he shares about his life drawing near to death, as he shares about his pit experiences...

**CC:** "Heman, I can't even begin to imagine what all of this has been like for you, but you're certainly helping me to get some sense of it. I hurt with you. And I want to hear more about all that's going on *inside you*."

And I think it would help me if I knew a bit more about what's going on *around you*. It's like Paul in [2 Corinthians 1:8-9](#). He didn't want his friends to be ignorant about what was happening *to* him, and then he shared what was happening *in* him—that he despaired of life and felt the sentence of death..."

**Heman:** "You don't know how encouraging that is. To think that someone like Paul felt like I feel and said words like I've said. It takes away a lot of Satan's shame and condemnation..."

And it means so much to me that you want to hear *me...know me...*"

Heman then shares more about his external situation, as well as more about his inner suffering...

**CC:** "There's another thought I want to mention before you share more with me about your soul's lament. Your words reflect so many scriptural phrases. 'Drawing near to death' reminds me of David in [Psalm 23](#) talking about 'walking through the valley of the shadow of death.' And 'going down to the pit' reminds me of David in [Psalm 40](#) talking about being in

the slimy pit of mud and mire. I also hear echoes of Job and of Ecclesiastes in your words... Could we make a mental note to revisit these Wisdom Literature passages in Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes later in our counseling together...?"

**Heman:** "Absolutely. I'd love that. To be honest, I'm not even sure I was totally aware of my allusions to those passages. That's a 'God-thing' in His Spirit bringing His truth to my mind..."

**CC:** "So, let's backtrack a little. Heman, could you tell me more about your lament to God, about what's going on in your soul...?"

**Heman:** "You know that I love journaling my thoughts and feelings. Here's more of what I shared with God recently.

'You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.'

**Heman and CC:** Heman and CC interact further, with CC drawing out more of Heman's lament...

**CC:** Waiting to see if Heman wants to share more. Sitting in silence.

"Your phrase, 'the darkest depths' remind me of a *long* tradition of believers sharing about *the dark night of the soul*. You are not alone...though I know you feel like you are, and that's so normal. Could we make another mental note to look at some psalms of the dark night, like a [Psalm 13](#), and see how those scriptural laments might relate to your laments...?"

**Heman:** "Wow! I guess I'm not alone. I'm writing down Psalm 13, Psalm 23, Psalm 40, and maybe a lot of Job and Ecclesiastes for us to look at later, and for me to look at in the coming weeks. Thanks."

**CC:** "I know there's much more going on for you. I'm here. We have time, if you're ready, to share more..."

**Heman:** "Well, you mentioned not being alone. That's an important reminder for me. Because I've felt like I've been alone. I've felt like God has taken from me my closest friends and made me repulsive to them."

**CC:** Takes a long, deep breath.

"That's a strong, painful word, 'repulsive.' Is that something you want to share more about right now...?"

**Heman:** "Thanks for giving me the option of sharing now or later. To borrow your phrase, maybe we'll 'make a mental note to return to that.'"



**CC:** “That’s totally fair...and understandable. Is there more you do feel able to share with me right now?”

**Heman:** “Yes. Here’s something else I wrote recently to the Lord.

‘I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you.’

If I’m honest, when I share something like that, I wonder what’s wrong with me. I mean, Paul talked about there being no temptation that we can bear and that God will provide a way to escape so we can endure it ([1 Corinthians 10:13](#)). What’s wrong with my faith that I’m not saying that right now?”

**CC:** “Heman, you show so much spiritual integrity to approach the cry of your soul like this. A couple of thoughts in response to your question.

First, the same Paul who said that in 1 Corinthians 10:13, also said something very much like what you’re saying. In [2 Corinthians 1:8](#), a passage we referenced a moment ago, Paul said that ‘we were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure.’ There are many biblical ‘moods of faith.’ The mood of honest lament where it feels like things are overwhelming. And the ‘mood of dependent trust’ where we cling to God for rescue, like Paul in [2 Corinthians 1:9](#) where he says he can’t rely upon himself, but must rely upon the God who raises the dead.

Another thought...if we look at the context of 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul is speaking about temptation to *sin*. On the other hand, your context, and Paul’s context in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, are about *suffering*. Biblically, some times God does allow overwhelming suffering. Why? Like we just heard Paul saying, *so that we will not rely upon ourselves but upon the God who raises the dead.*”

**Heman:** “You don’t know how helpful that is. Wow! Again, that addresses Satan’s condemnation in my life. It is hard enough to endure such suffering, but when I find Satan whispering or shouting that *I should be ashamed of myself for having feelings*, then it is almost too much to bear.

Your words about God raising the dead, also remind me of how dead I am feeling. Here’s another real and raw lament I shared with God.

‘Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do their spirits rise up and praise you? Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?’”

**CC:** “You said you would share ‘real and raw’ and you are. Thank you.

Again. You are not alone. Your words remind me so much of Job, in many passages, including in [Job 14](#). How ‘bout we turn there and read Job 14 together?”

**Heman/CC:** They read Job 14 together.

**CC:** “What in Job 14 resonates with you? What ‘fits’? What doesn’t fit and how might you say it a bit differently?”

**Heman:** Heman shares his reflections on Job 14... Heman and CC interact together...

**CC:** “I’m glad we gave ourselves 90-ish minutes for our first meeting. You’re really helping me to begin to get a glimpse into your soul and your situation. We have about 15 more minutes. For this initial meeting, what else would you want me to know, to hear from your heart...?”

**Heman:** “Man, time flies when you’re being helped! I could do this all day. Maybe I can summarize for you with a longer section of a recent prayer I prayed to the Lord. And, again, to use your wording, ‘maybe we can pick up on this more next time...’

‘But I cry to you for help, LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you. Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me? From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. You have taken from me friend and neighbor—darkness is my closest friend.’”

**CC:** “Heman, would you mind my having a copy of that part of your lament? I’d like to reflect on it more, hear your soul more, and use it to pray for you.”

**Heman:** “Not at all. But please don’t share it with anyone else. I’m not so sure what others would think about my ending a prayer with ‘darkness is my closest friend.’ Honestly...I’m not sure what *you* think about *me* and my having done that...”

**CC:** “Well, let me address your wonderings first.

I. Respect. You.

I. Resonate. With You.

Even more importantly, *Jesus* resonates with you. Jesus is your High Priest who *empathizes* with you, as we’re told in [Hebrews 4:14-16](#).

Three of the four Gospels record the account of Jesus’ lament in the Garden—and His intense, ‘real and raw’ sharing of His soul with His Father. And in [Matthew 26:37-38](#), he shared openly with three of his disciples about how sorrowful and troubled He was, saying to them, ‘My soul is *overwhelmed* with sorrow *to the point of death*. Stay here and keep watch with me.’”

**Heman:** “I never thought about it like that. I mean, if Jesus can be overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, then He certainly ‘gets me.’ And maybe it’s okay to admit that it seems like darkness is my closest friend...”

**CC:** “That’s spot on, Heman. Like Jesus, you’re lamenting—to God. For at least the third time today you are bringing God into the center of your soul. You just said, ‘But I cry to *you* for help, LORD; in the morning my prayer comes *before you*.’”

God invites the cry of our soul. He is big enough to handle whatever is in us. He’s big enough and gracious enough and near enough to handle your soul, your words. He is the God of [Isaiah 40:10-11](#):

‘See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.

He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.’

How do those verses hit you when you’re wondering about ending a prayer with ‘darkness is my closest friend’?”

**Heman/CC:** Heman and CC interact about Isaiah 40:10-11...

**CC:** “Unfortunately, our time is just about up. I definitely want us to follow-up on what you shared about suffering, being close to death, bearing terrors, being in despair, feeling destroyed, surrounded like a flood, completely engulfed...”

CC sighs a sigh of “empathetic exhaustion.”

“First, that’s a *lot* of pain, a lot of trauma. And opening up to me about that can, in the long run be very helpful, but in the short term can be emotionally exhausting and even troubling and even re-traumatizing. *How are you doing right now? How do you think you will be doing over the next few days?*”

**Heman:** Heman shares.

Heman and CC set up some “safety nets” for Heman...

**CC:** “Let’s definitely pick up on all those honest expressions of your heart the next time we meet.

I like to do ‘collaborative homework,’ or ‘collaborative personal application.’ Let’s both take a minute to reflect on our time together and to prayerfully ponder what would be something helpful for you to focus on over the next week...”

**Heman/CC:** They share together about “homework/application” ...

CC: “One final thought before we wrap up together in prayer...

In God’s affectionate sovereignty, the last words of your lament, in the Hebrew Bible, are followed immediately by these words in [Psalm 89:1](#):

‘I will sing of the LORD’s great love forever.’

These words remind me of what you shared with me and with God at least three times today—your *Coram Deo*, face-to-face with Father approach to your suffering.

Here’s a *gospel-centered reality* to take with you this week, my friend, Heman.

While it feels like darkness is your closest friend, there is a forever faithful Father/Friend who loves you forever—who loves you even while you are feeling friendless. You don’t have to ‘fix your feelings’ for Father to run to you, throw His arms around you, kiss you, and celebrate with you ([Luke 15:20-24](#)). His love is a grace-love. You don’t have to earn it. You don’t have to ‘feel up’ to deserve it. Father’s love is forever faithful because of His Son’s faithfulness...

Let’s pray together as we wrap up our first time together...”

## **Join the Conversation**

### **Questions for Application and Discussion**

1. I noted at the beginning of Part 2 that there's no "one-size-fits-all" approach to providing biblical comfort to a grieving, lamenting person. So, what are some ways that your *first meeting* with Heman might sound different from the dialogue/vignette above? What might *you* focus on in a first counseling session with Heman?
  
2. What are some strengths of the dialogue/vignette that I have written about counseling with Heman? What are some weaknesses? What might be missing that you would add in a first spiritual conversation with Heman?
  
3. What additional questions might you ask of Heman? What else would you want to know about Heman and from Heman?
  
4. What biblical passages, theological principles, and biblical counseling concepts would help you to frame your thinking about what was going on in Heman's soul and about how to approach providing loving biblical comfort and counsel for Heman?
  
5. What is your biblical counseling theology of lament, grief, suffering, trauma, and healing hope? From what passages would you build your model of biblical "sufferology"?
  
6. What is your biblical counseling practical theology of sustaining empathy, comfort, and compassion? What is your biblical counseling practical theology of healing hope? What passages do you use in developing these approaches?
  
7. I talked about "dual listening"—listening well and wisely to Heman's earthly story of suffering while listening together to and weaving in God's eternal, heavenly story of healing hope. What biblical passages would you use to support and develop your ministry of "dual listening"?

8. I talked about not only doing *data collection* but also emphasizing *soul connection* as you listen compassionately to Heman's story. Where in the Scriptures do you see God's people connecting deeply soul-to-soul, suffering with and weeping with one another?
9. What additional biblical passages might you want to explore with Heman in a first meeting? In subsequent meetings?
10. After your first meeting, what do you think some relevant "homework" might look like?
11. What would your goals be for your second meeting with Heman? What would you focus on in your next couple of meetings with Heman?
12. What would your overall counseling goals with Heman be? What would you base these goals on?
13. Would there be any additional training that you would want to receive in order to be more competent to counsel Heman? If you were being supervised, what questions might you be asking your supervisor about counseling/comforting Heman? What additional reading might you want to do in order to be more effective in providing soul care for Heman? Would there be anything that might make you wonder if you should refer Heman to another counselor who perhaps has more training, experience, and competency in this area—and how might you make that decision?
14. What materials, resources, blog posts, articles, booklets, or books might you eventually want to recommend for Heman to read?
15. How might you want to try to connect Heman to others in the body of Christ to be a source of support, comfort, and encouragement to Heman? Are there any other church-based or para-church connections, or community resources that you might want to connect Heman with?

16. What role might “counselor self-disclosure” have in your interactions with Heman. That is, how much and to what extent might you share about any “dark nights of the soul” that you have experienced? How would you then direct the focus back to Heman’s concerns?
  
17. Personally, how have you worked through any “dark nights of the soul”? If this post raises any personal issues for you, how might you work through them? Who could you talk to if you were experiencing a Psalm 88 “dark night”? What would you want from a soul physician, biblical counselor, or spiritual friend who was helping you with your own “dark night of the soul”? What biblical passages might you turn to as you faced your suffering face-to-face with your Father?
  
18. What questions would you want to ask *me* about my approach to counseling and comforting Heman?