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Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke
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Title of sermon: **How Do I Face These Evil Days**
Series: Don't Settle for Normal - #3

Psalm 88 A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah. For the director of music. According to mahalath leannoth. A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

1 O LORD, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you. **2** May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry. **3** For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave. **4** I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like a man 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 upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. Selah **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, O LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you. **10** Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? Selah **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, O LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you. **14** Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me? **15** From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I have suffered 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 my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.

If you live in Oregon, and -- probably a lot of different places, but certainly in Oregon -- seasons are one of those things that you're very well aware of. And intuitively, you know what to do in every one of those seasons. When it's springtime, and summer, right now -- you mow. There's not a person that I know that has their mower stuck away in the back of the garage, and if you do, it's because you zero-scraped your place. You know when it's summertime, you mow. You know when it's springtime, you get your wood ready for the winter. You know when it's fall, you call the chimney guy. You know every season that you live in, there's a protocol. You know what to do. When it's winter, you get the boots out. When it's summer, you put the boots away. When it's winter, you get your heavy coats out. When it's summer, you get your shorts out -- without even thinking. No one has to assign you -- why? Because you know in the seasons of your life how to act. But most of us probably have not thought about the seasons of your spiritual life. Do you know what to do in the various seasons of your spiritual life? There are seasons. The Bible says there's a season for everything. There's a season where we mourn, there's a season where we rejoice, there's a season where we plant, there's a season where we harvest. And one of the seasons that all of us will go through -- and probably not just once -- it's called winter. Winter is not a fun season. It's dark. It's bleak. Sometimes it feels like it's going to last forever. It goes on and on. It's unrelenting. It's grim. Around here, the days are much shorter in terms of daylight. And it's hard in the middle of winter. It's wet. In the winter seasons of our own personal life, sometimes we like to blast through them. I know, I do. 2015, my father died, and I didn't miss a week of preaching. I just went on. I didn't stop. I didn't cancel an appointment. It was almost like -- and, for those of you who know the story, in many ways he wasn't a father to me. I almost more fathered him. But it was -- I made my way through it. I just kind of plowed on. I made decisions. Sometimes you want to get through winter.

In 1995, my daughter -- she was having heart surgery. We naturally went down to the hospital, and it was kind of focused on some time, but -- I think one of the things -- if you were to evaluate my life, and many psychiatrists probably would have loved to have done that, and still do -- one of the ways I process winter, struggle, darkness, difficulty -- whether it be evil or just the trials of life is, I kind of hunker down and I plow through it. I took some time off, I think maybe a couple of weeks, and my daughter was in the hospital, and I wrote sermons there in the hospital, and I began to work again. Sometimes when we go through winter, we're not sure what to do because, unlike the seasons of earth where we know exactly what to do, in our spiritual life, we're not always sure what to do. In this series, *Don't Settle For Normal*, the first three weeks is processing emotions -- God, what do we do with them? And this one is the emotion of winter. The evil that we see and experience. God, what do we do with it? And if you don't know what to do with it, you don't know how to move through it, and you also miss the opportunity that this writer did, because in this season, though winter can last a long time, and it can be a place of incredible loneliness and isolation, as it was for him -- it's also a place of grace and greatness. Winter can be a place of grace and greatness if you know what to do with the season, if you know how to process through that season. In the seasons of earth, you know exactly what to do. You mow your lawn. Why? Because it's springtime, it's summer. You plant in the spring, you harvest in the summer. You are born. You are trained. But sometimes people don't train us. What do we do in the season, the spiritual season of winter? It's a season of harsh loneliness, but it can be a season of grace and greatness if you know how to process winter.

What are the descriptions of winter? The text tells us in Psalm 88. It says, number one, that there's a separation. It creates an ambivalence, and you've probably, in yourself, you've often noticed this understanding that sometimes my head and my heart can be on two different pages. I can know things that I don't actualize in my heart. There are things that I know about God, that I've been taught about God, but I don't experience in my life. That's where Heman is. Not Heman, the one who was killed, but this is Heman the writer, the musician. The one who is a worship leader. He starts off and he says, "God, you're the one who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. Oh, Lord! You are my salvation!" And he also says, "God, you've abandoned me. God, you've turned away from me. God, you've taken my best friends. God, you've led me into darkness. God, you've left me here." Now, which one is it? One of the things of winter is, when there's a separation of what we believe and what we know about God and what we experience with God. It's when we understand that God is a God of justice and yet we don't experience it. We process things that are happening on this earth, be it some of us are struggling with what's happening -- be it in the race issue, in the police issue -- and we're trying to process that whole thing. We're trying to process the whole issue, all that's going on with the COVID issue, and we look at all of this, and we want to know -- "God, where are you? Why don't you understand? Lord, why on earth did you allow the Supreme Court justices this week to rule the way they did? Completely abandoned constitutional understanding and biblical revelation. God, where are you?" My friends, as a country, we're in winter. We are. There's not a place you can go. You can go to Idaho, you can go to Wyoming. The reality is, the Supreme Court justice that just ruled over the United States actually has authority, last I was told, in Wyoming. We're in winter. And what happens in winter, just like Heman, is that we have things and knowledge about God and it separates from our experience with God. That ambivalence creates a tear, and in his life, an intense loneliness.

What is the description of winter? It's the separation of what we believe and what we experience that oftentimes leads to an intense loneliness. This wasn't a separatist guy. This wasn't an individual that didn't have a bunch of friends. This was a worship leader. Every day, he was assigned by David, by the way, to be David's chief worship leader. We often think of Asaph. This is the guy who mentored Asaph! This is the one who trained Asaph! This is the one who led the entire liturgy and the

formation of a score of psalms. Alone? No. But here? Yes. "You've put me in the lowest pit, God. Your wrath lies heavily on me. You've overwhelmed me. You've taken from me all of my closest friends." Really? What happened to Asaph? What happened to your sons? What happened to all of the musicians that were writing with you? Were they all gone?

The description of winter is when you feel isolated, when you feel alone, when you feel like everyone has abandoned you, and most importantly -- and probably most dangerously, or most threatening -- is when you feel like God has left you. If you think that that's bad news, I've got bad news. It can get worse. What is the description of the winter heart? It's an isolation that feels cold and feels like you've been abandoned by God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Do those words ring true? What is the temptation of the winter heart? I call it -- and I use this term from a good friend of mine, who wrote a book on men, and he used this one concept, and I've always loved it -- "zeroed thinking." What is zeroed thinking? It's the person that takes their life -- you've seen this. You probably have heard this from a person. That zeroes themselves out, and says, "I don't even know why God created me. I don't even know why He puts up with me. I don't know why God even allows me. He doesn't listen to my prayers, and so, why was I even created?" It's a person that zeroes themselves out. "I don't know why I was on this team. Nobody wants to listen to me. I don't even know why I should go to this church. No one even wants me." It's the person that kind of just caves in on themselves. That's where he went. Listen to him -- "I'm confined, I can't escape. Do you show the wonders to the dead? You certainly don't show them to me! I must not be high on your list, God, because you haven't shown me any miracles recently. Are your wonders known in the place of darkness? Ha! Because I surely don't see any. Why, oh God, do you reject me, and hide your face from me? From my youth I've been afflicted and close to death."

What's the temptation of winter? The temptation of winter is to move where we see a lot of our culture moving today -- it's what we might call the "victim's mentality." It's the person who always feels, "I'm wronged, no one takes me seriously, no one listens to me" -- and his words are, "God, you don't listen to me! You don't take me seriously!" Now, what caused this? Was it God who did this? No. It was the riots in Seattle. It was the tragedy in Atlanta. It's the confusion in Minneapolis. It's the terror of Portland. What was it that was causing this for him? It was the evil that he saw. It's the same thing that's causing many of you to feel abandoned by God, frustrated by God, like He's left, and you say, "Oh, I know why this is happening, because we left God!" Well, maybe it is. But why doesn't God listen to His church? There's not ten righteous people in the US? There's not a thousand righteous people in the US? There's not ten thousand righteous in the US? There's not ten thousand righteous in Oregon? There's not? Why doesn't God listen? We're in winter. And one of the challenges that can happen is, we begin to zero ourselves out, and we move, not only from zeroed thinking -- even worse, in winter -- irrational thinking.

What's irrational? Verse 15. "From my youth I've been afflicted and close to death." Really? Heman, you wrote a number of psalms, and you're trying to tell me now that from virtually your youth, God's abandoned you? God's never been for you? God's never listened to you? What happens in a season of winter, if you're in it long enough, and you don't process it well, and you get isolated -- that's one of the great dangers. We may laugh at it, and some of you, I know, you've told me -- you've said, "Oh man, I'm an introvert. I've loved being at home." Well, I got news for you. Not every un-introvert's doing all that well. Because not every introvert's thinking all that well. Because sometimes when we get at home, and when we get isolated, we begin to think just like Heman, as we begin to look at the news and we understand what's going on, and we begin to maybe even get frightened, and realize -- "Wow, God, this is not the country I grew up in!" It's not. We may slip into winter's irrational thinking -- "The church is gone. The church is done. We're never

going to be able to meet. The church is spineless. How come the church won't do anything? There must be no righteous people!" I've heard all of these things. Where we move in winter to the place where we make irrational statements. There's not ten righteous people in Oregon, there's not a thousand righteous people in the US, there's not ten thousand righteous people? They've all abandoned God? And God is walking away?

What would it be like if your child came to you and said, "I would rather spend a month in a dark cave than an evening going out for dinner with you"? How would that make you feel? Because that's what Heman said to God. "You've taken all my best friends. You don't listen to my prayers. You don't care about what I care about. You've taken my companions, my loved ones from me. Darkness is my closest friend. All day long, your wrath. It seems like I wake up in the morning and I get your wrath, I go to bed in the evening, I get your wrath. Your terrors, they've destroyed me." Is that really the way it is? One of the great dangers and temptations of winter, spiritually, is that when it lasts long enough, and when it hurts deep enough, we begin to say things. We probably know in our mind that we really don't actually believe, but we start shouting them at God. And more than a few people have just picked them up and said, "That's what I believe." What's the result? He's furious. You said, "Pastor, wait a minute -- you said that there's grace in this text, and I've read through the end. There's no grace. And you said there's hope and there's greatness in this text, and there's no greatness! Where on earth do you get grace?" Well, there is. There is both grace and greatness. Where is it? Where's the grace in this text? Number one, I think the grace for the winter heart is in the darkness of winter. God listens. You may say, "Well, that's not big news." Well, I think it is. I think it's huge news. You shout at God, and you tell God He's a loser, and you tell God that you would rather spend the rest of your life in darkness than with him, and that God doesn't strike you dead, I think that's grace. You tell God that "You haven't done anything for me my entire life," and God doesn't strike you dead and give you an Excel spreadsheet of all the things that He's ever done for you, I think that's grace!

But even more, the fact that this scripture is in our Bible should shock you. This text alone tells me that mankind didn't write this. So, I'm not saying that Heman wasn't the author of it under the inspiration of God, I'm suggesting that God superintended His writing and its selection into the text of scripture, because why would any person shout at God and tell God, "I hate your guts"? When we're trying to make God look good? One author said, "You can tell the Bible is different than any other text, because it's not trying to sell anything." It's not. You wouldn't put Psalm 88 in the Bible if the Bible was trying to sell you something. Who's trying to sell God on this one? "God, you don't listen to me! You've taking my closest friends! Wrath is from you every day! Hallelujah, you're God, you saved me! I think." But here's the grace. God's listening. How do I know that? It's in the text. How do I know that? Because He's praying. God in this text doesn't reprove him, he doesn't correct him -- He listens. Even though he's disrespectful, God listens. Even though he's unbridled in his complaint, God listens. Even though he's dishonorable to God, and in many ways exaggerates things far beyond anything that you can imagine, God listens. That's grace. It's grace when somebody that you

created stands up to you and tells you off when you could straighten them out, and God wondrously listens. There's grace for the winter heart.

What's the second observation of grace? It's this. Go with me to the very end of this scripture. I will read it for you in the NIV. You might have another translation, but my NIV says this, in verse 18: "You have taken my companions and loved ones from me -- the darkness is my closest friend." If you read it in the Hebrew, it actually says it this way -- I'll try and read it in its wooden form -- "You've taken from me my companions, my closest friends; all I have is darkness." The last word of this text is that -- darkness. Psalm 88 stands out as one of two psalms in the Bible that do not resolve. What I mean by that is, it doesn't resolve to, "Yet God, I will praise you" -- Psalm 73. Asaph, who was trained by this individual. Asaph is complaining to God, and said, "God, I don't know why those rascals who hate you get by so well and the righteous don't," and then he says, "but then I went into the house of the Lord and I came to my senses. Ah, God, I get it!" Psalm 88 doesn't resolve. It doesn't finish positively. It finishes with a word -- darkness. The only other psalm that is that way is Psalm 39. It's the psalm where David says to God, "God, turn your face from me. I don't want to look at you." And finishes. It's the only two psalms in the Bible. How on earth is that grace? Because darkness doesn't get the final word. It doesn't.

Sometimes we look over titles. Oftentimes you wouldn't even look at them. Here's a point where I want you to look at the title. Would you go back to the very beginning with me. "A song." [Laughs] "A psalm of the Sons of Korah. For the director of music." Now, that should stop you for a moment. Yes, they were singing this in their church for worship music. Really? Yes. The grace for the winter heart. God does listen. Darkness does not get the final word. How do I know that? Look at the title. "For the director of music. According to the maskil of Heman the Ezrahite."

Heman. Who is this guy? He leads us to my last point, the hope for the winter heart. How do I know that darkness doesn't get the final word? Because -- the title tells me about its author. It's really important. Sometimes in a title it just says a psalm of David. Sometimes it says it's a psalm of Asaph. This one says it's a psalm of the sons of Korah, in particular, written by Heman. Who was this man? If you go to I Chronicles chapter six, it will tell you that David, when he was establishing the leadership, put Heman in charge of worship. He was the one in charge. He was the leader of the sons of Korah. He was the mentor of Asaph. He says later that Asaph was his assistant. If you go and look at Psalm 73, a score of other psalms, Asaph was one of the most prolific writers. But let's drill down just a little deeper into Heman. Because you see, it was Heman that was writing. It was Heman that was leading the sons of Korah. And if you turn to Psalm 46, one of the most lofty, glorious psalms in the Bible that was written on the backdrop of the glorious victory of Jehoshaphat, it will tell you who wrote that. The sons of Korah. Led by a man who made it through winter. Where is the hope of winter? It is in winter, my friend, where God forges some of the deepest character and grace and conviction and love that He's ever forged.

Malcolm Muggeridge was the one who said, "The only thing in life I have worth remembering -- the only thing in life I have worth remembering, I learned in suffering." And sometimes in winter, like a diamond that is compressed under intense pressure and heat -- the Christian's life is forged. And that's why it's winter that is not only the opportunity of grace, but of greatness. There is hope for winter. Oh, absolutely, there's hope for winter. Why did David choose him? Because I think, much like David, Heman was an incredibly honest man. And he knew what it meant to navigate the season of winter spiritually. You don't lie about it, you're not dishonest about it. You understand it can be a long season with great temptation to move into places of the irrationality and isolation, but it is a place of hope -- why? Because it's in winter you realize darkness doesn't get the final word. How do we know that? There was a man who was on a cross, and the scripture says that darkness came over the entire world. And it says that the Father turned His face from Him. Interestingly enough, you put Psalm 88 together with Psalm 39, and you have Jesus Christ. Darkness covered the

world, and the Father's face was turned away from Him. And yet you and I know that three days later Christ walked out of the grave, and darkness did not have the final word.

I believe as a country we're in winter. We're in a hard season right now. We are. I've no idea how long it's going to last. I do know this -- people are saying irrational things. Some people are saying things where they feel God has abandoned, maybe even left our country. They've rationalized, they know why. People are attributing certain things, and saying, "Where are we at in the Book of Revelation?" I have no idea where we're at in the Book of Revelation, I'm not reading it right now. I think we're in winter. And it is a place where darkness will not get the final word for the person who knows how to navigate the winter season of your spiritual life. It is a place of hope. When Heman wrote Psalm 88, I don't think he had any idea that he would also become the author of some of the most beautiful, God-inspired, faith-inspiring psalms, some of the most beautiful pieces of literature in the psalms, forties and the eighties. Hundreds of thousands of people taught to worship, taught to pray. But maybe one of his best gifts to you and me is -- he teaches you how to navigate the spiritual season of winter. You see, it's in the hope of winter that we have the anticipation of grace and greatness. What is grace? God listens to you. And, like Derek Kidner has said, and others, it is this grace of God, the very presence of these prayers is witness to God's understanding that He knows how men speak when they are desperate.

There was a pastor that went to an elderly lady in his church, and people would often ask her, "How do you deal with the pain?" And she goes, "Oh, it's not anything that resurrection can't take care of." See, my friends, I think we're in winter. But if you believe in the resurrection, if you believe that there was a man by the name of Jesus Christ who hung on a cross, and darkness came over the earth, and the Father turned His face from Him, and the enemy on that day thought, "I have them! I've won!" See, I think Satan right now is sitting in Hell, throwing the biggest party in the world, because he thinks -- "I've got the US! I've got them! I'm gonna destroy them with anger and rage, I'm toppling down all the things -- I've sequestered the church away, I've got them!" Somehow, I think he forgot that Jesus Christ walked out of the grave. And Heman teaches us how to navigate the winter season. It is a season of grace, and it is a season of greatness when you understand that because of the resurrection, darkness never gets the final word.

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