

A Friend in the Darkness

Psalm 88

The Psalms have always been treasured by Christians for the way they give voice to the whole range of human experience.

Athanasius, a third century bishop, said of the Psalms: “I think that in the words of this book all human life is covered, with all its states and thoughts, and that nothing further can be found in a human being.”

There are Psalms of confident faith, thoughtful wisdom, of exuberant praise, and overflowing thanks. These songs give voice to a whole range of experience and emotion. But what if your experience is one of doubt rather than confidence? What if wisdom is the last thing on your mind as you weep? What if your emotions are so fraught that getting out of bed is hard enough, let alone raising your voice in thanks or praise? What if life has not lifted to the mountain tops but left you in the pit? What then? Are there Psalms for these times too?

Well, yes. Of the 150 songs and prayers in the book of Psalms, about 57 of them are called Psalms of lament. And so listen to the words the reformer John Calvin used when he called the Psalms “An Anatomy of the Soul”. He said, “there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which our minds are agitated.”

More than any other experience or emotion, the Bible is filled with songs crying out to God from places of trouble and hurt and pain. Psalm 88, which we just read, is such a Psalm of lament. It’s probably the bleakest of all of them. And as we wrestle with with it’s stark description of darkness and despair, I hope we will find in this psalm a surprising source of good news in suffering. So let’s jump into the pit that is Psalm 88.

1. Deep Darkness and the Depths of Despair

And I simply want to highlight here how both the structure and the language of Psalm 88 convey the psalmist's experience of deep darkness and the emotional depths of his despair.

So first consider the structure of the Psalm. You can see how the Psalm is laid out basically as three cries the Lord. In verse 2 we read:

May my prayer come before you...

And in verse 9:

I call to you Lord every day...

Then again in verse 13:

I cry to you for help, Lord...

Now normally, in a Psalm of Lament there is a moment of turning and remembering. Consider Psalm 77. Just like in Psalm 88 there are a series of confronting questions posed of God:

“Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?
Has his unfailing love vanished forever?
Has his promise failed for all time?
Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?”

But then, the Psalmist thinks back in verse 10:

Then I thought, “To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.
I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds.”

This remembering is like a foothold that helps the Psalmist to clamber up ever so slightly out of the pit. It's like a glimmer of light piercing the darkness. It's like taking a deep breath, inhaling the goodness and love of God, allowing the psalmist to exhale praise, even in the midst of suffering.

But there is no foothold here in Psalm 88. There is no piercing light. There's no turning or remembering. Charles Spurgeon says that the lone ray of light in this Psalm is verse 1, when the Psalmist begins: *Lord you are the God who saves me.*

But the rest of the Psalm seems to completely betray this statement. This appeal to the God who saves spirals down into accusation, questioning and desperation. The abrupt final line of the Psalm is only two words in Hebrew: *my friends | darkness.*

The darkness looms larger than the Lord. And in the end, it's like this man in the pit completely runs out of breath. Totally exhausted.

And the words of the psalm convey the very same thing. Consider the way he piles up language of darkness and death:

Troubles, near to death, down to the pit, without strength, in the grave, remembered no more, cut off from your care.

Lowest pit, *darkest* depths. Overwhelmed by waves of God's wrath. Confined, cannot escape.

Destruction, darkness, oblivion. Surrounded like a flood, completely engulfed.

This is where I am. The Psalmist says. In such darkness that I might as well be dead.

Actually he goes further than that. **This is where YOU have put me God.** You have taken everything from me.

My friends | Darkness.

You wonder don't you, what experience lies behind this psalm. What suffering brought forth *this song*.

Terminal illness. Severe Depression. Chronic Pain. Persecution. Some form of domestic abuse. Some past sin. Breakdown of family relationships. The loss of a dear friend. War or violence.

Like most laments, the actual events behind the Psalm are obscure enough that this prayer could apply to all manner of suffering we may face in this life.

And it may be that I captures some experience or emotion that you have had in the past.

It could describe where you are now, how you are currently feeling.

Perhaps there's someone close to you living through such a 'dark night of the soul'.

I spoke to someone who said just recently that they felt exactly like this. Like everyone had abandoned them and darkness was their only friend. It's a terrible place to be. No doubt there are others in our church family who have or are feeling this very same thing.

And whether this is your lived experience now, or if suffering like this lies in your future, Psalm 88 not only speaks about it, but it also speaks encouragement *into it*. Today I want to suggest three ways this Psalm is surprisingly good news for those who suffer.

2. Good News: This Prayer is Here

Firstly, I think it is good news that this prayer is *here* in our Bibles. We shouldn't overlook how amazing that really is. I mean the psalmist doesn't really hold back in making accusations against the Lord:

You have put me in the lowest pit...; *Your* wrath lies heavily on me...; *Your* terrors have destroyed me...; *You* have taken from me...

And you might think, far out, can I say that? Can I *pray* that?

But the fact this prayer is here in the book of Psalms means we *can* say that. To those suffering in this way, God has given this Psalm, saying "here, here is something you can pray."

Which tells us two things.

Firstly, suffering is not abnormal or out of the ordinary for God's faithful people. To suffer deeply does not leave you stuck out on the fringes, while everyone else is cruising along in the happy middle.

As Spurgeon says:

Are good men ever permitted to suffer thus? Indeed they are; and some of them are even all their life time subject to bondage. O Lord, Be pleased to set free thy prisoners of hope! Let, none of thy mourners imagine that a strange thing has happened unto him, but rather rejoice as he sees the footprints of brethren who have trodden this desert before.

Or another writer says:

the predominance of laments at the very heart of Israel's prayers means that the problems that give rise to lament are not something marginal or unusual but . . . are central in the life of faith. . . .

In the depths of suffering you can take up the words of this Psalm and join your voice to the many brothers and sisters who have sat in the same pit before you and have cried out to God just like you.

And the second thing is that this is what God wants you to do. God doesn't want his suffering people to put on fake smiles and sing praise choruses through gritted teeth. He wants us to pour out our hearts and pray all of our hurts, even with this sort of confronting openness and honesty.

Some psalms of lament are finely structured, and they help us to see the benefits of of praying reflectively in our grief. But Psalm 88 is raw and unfiltered, and it encourages us to pray reflexively. And even when the darkness is so deep we can only muster complaint and accusation, God still encourages us to pray. And whatever we might want to say, he can handle it.

And just as an aside, it's worth asking whether our church is a place that can handle such an open expression of pain and hurt? Do those suffering in this way feel like they can be here, in the same way this psalm is in the pages of our bibles?

There is something uncomfortable about grief that is *this* raw and this unfiltered. And it's a very north shore thing to hide away how we're feeling behind a shiny and smiling veneer. But if our church is to reflect our Scriptures, rather than our culture, we ought to grow comfortable with lament. There ought to be space to pray like this

May our church be a place where those who suffer don't feel like they're stuck on the fringes. May our church be a place where suffering can be openly expressed, and where our listening to those who lament, reflects the listening of God.

3. Good News: God Hears

For that's the second piece of surprising good news from Psalm 88. Not only is this Psalm here, but God also *hears*.

And I think that this is the conviction that underlines the whole psalm. For while it may seem like the statement of faith in verse 1 — you are the God who saves me — is at odds with the rest of the Psalm, it actually makes sense of all that follows.

For it must be a particular sort of agony that comes from knowing that God could save you, but doesn't. A particular kind of grief that comes from knowing that God is in total control, and yet there you are in the pit. A particular pain in knowing of God's goodness and faithfulness and feeling like he has forsaken you.

All the accusations and questions of the psalm from from this conviction: *The God who saves me, is here with me and he can hear me.*

Even in the darkness, the psalmist believes that his cry for help comes before the Lord, as he says in verse 13. He may not experience God's presence as a friend, and yet his prayers rise from this wick of trust that still smoulders within him.

To pray from the pit, is an act of great faith. And I personally have been so encouraged by brothers and sisters at St Mark's who have persevered in this sort of prayer. Psalm 88 shows us that perseverance is progress, as our prayers continue to be heard by the Lord. As one of my favourite songs of the moment puts it:

Still praise is the song that I'm singing / Even though sorrow's my
tune

My love is only a whisper now / But nothing is wasted with you

Nothing is wasted when we pray to the God who hears.

4. **Good News: Jesus has been Here**

But how can we know that this isn't just wishful thinking? I'm sure some today would say that clinging onto this hope that God really hears our prayers, and actually cares about us, is just adding another unnecessary source of disappointment to our lives. How can we know that God is present with us even in the depths of the pit.

Well, the final piece of good news from Psalm 88 is that *Jesus has been here*.

Did you hear the echoes of Jesus' own experience and emotions throughout this Psalm?

Remember how Jesus was overwhelmed by troubles in the garden of Gethsemane as he knew his death was drawing near. How his strength drained away as he was beaten and scourged, treated like a criminal destined for the grave.

And nailed to the cross, Jesus experienced the heaviness of God's anger at human sin, crashing like a terrifying wave over him. He was betrayed and denied by his closest friends, and mocked and reviled by the crowds.

And as the darkness thickened on that day, Jesus too cried out, asking why God had hidden his face. For Jesus on the cross, darkness had become his closest friends.

And so we find that Psalm 88 is, like all the Psalms, first and foremost a prayer of Jesus.

The Christian story is that Jesus climbed down into our pit. That he faced up to our darkness. That he bore the wrath and died the God-forsaken death that we deserved.

And because he has walked this path before us. And because he was not abandoned to the grave but rose again to life and light. And because he has poured his Spirit into our hearts. It means we can know we have a friend in the darkness.

Now this won't answer all your questions about your suffering. By no means. As we've seen it can even make the questions all the more pointed. And it probably won't lessen the severity of the suffering itself. But it does mean you are not alone. There is someone who has come down into the pit, and who is still with you in the pit, and will never leave you in the pit.

Jonathan Edwards wrote:

He came down from heaven and has taken upon himself human nature for this purpose, that he might be near to you and might be, as it were, your companion.

Or the Puritan Richard Sibbes:

As his friendship is sweet, so it is constant in all conditions. . . . If other friends fail, as friends may fail, yet this friend will never fail us. If we be not ashamed of him, he will never be ashamed of us. Oh if we could draw out the comfort that this title of friend affords! It is a comfortable, a fruitful, an eternal friendship.

And so if you are in a pit right now. Or if one day you find yourself in the darkness. Draw your comfort from the friendship of Jesus. For in the darkness Jesus offers us his prayers of lament in the psalms and says, here pray this with me. And he says, I know it's dark, but my father is listening. And he says, trust me, I've been here before, and I'm here with you now, and I promise on my life, we're getting out of here. In Jesus we find that the Lord, the God who saves, really is our friend in the darkness. Amen.