



“Does God Care That I’m Hurting?”

Scripture – Psalm 88

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, March 2, 2025

Last week I began a sermon series on seven psalms to give everyone a taste of the variety we discover in the Book of Psalms. As a reminder, the psalms are not rules, laws, or teachings. They are poems, prayers, and hymns. They are liturgical elements to be used by the congregation when gathered for corporate worship, or by an individual for personal devotion.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann enriched my understanding of the psalms by proposing a simple three category system. The categories are Orientation, Disorientation, and New Orientation. Brueggemann is clear that we cannot apply his formula to strictly chart all 150 Psalms. However, it can broaden our comprehension of various psalms as long as we hold his scheme loosely.

Last week, we focused on a psalm that neatly falls into the category of Orientation. Psalm 104 heaps effusive praise on God as the Creator of all there is. Today’s psalm, Psalm 88, may be the supreme example of a psalm of Disorientation. It is a prayer – a desperate pleading with God – by someone whose world has collapsed in a heap of ash. Listen to the words of anguish by one who is not only in agony but also feels abandoned by God. If I were to give this psalm a title it would be: “Unrelenting Pain and Vanishing Hope.” It is one of the most forlorn pleas in the Bible. Its twin is Psalm 22 that begins with those haunting words Jesus cried from the cross: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Listen to the cry of desperation in Psalm 88.

If you think that psalms 88 and 22 are just anomalies, here is a taste of Psalm 13: “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long?”

If your familiarity with the psalms is limited to the triumphant “Make a joyful noise to the Lord!” And, the comforting, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” Psalm 88 and its cousins strike dissonant chords.

So, why drag words of misery into the sanctuary? Why not stick with the psalms that boost our happiness and our sense of well-being? We know why. Because life is not all joy and comfort. Sometimes darkness descends and we need words to express our grief, our fears, and our despair.

Mitch Everingham asked a friend to pray for him and he bowed his head. The friend prayed, “God, I pray that Mitch never again feels sad about his sister.”

Mitch’s eyes shot open and he did not hear another word of the prayer. The words were like sandpaper scraped across his bare skin. He had asked his friend to pray for him not long after the sudden death of his sister who was only 13 years old. Hearing those words of prayer, Mitch thought to himself, “I’m heartbroken over the death of my sister. Is that wrong? Is a prayer supposed to wipe away my grief?” Worse, does faith imply that heartbreak is a sign of weakness? Or that gloom is an emotion that God will not tolerate? That experience pushed Mitch down a path of earnestly seeking to understand how to pray when life strikes a cruel blow.¹

What he stumbled upon were psalms of lament. Words of Scripture that provide expressions of despair when the doctor confirms our illness is terminal, when we are told we are being laid off work, when our spouse walks out the door for good, when childhood memories of abuse resurface, when we fear turbulent times in our country. And I suspect psalms of lament are the only ones that make any sense at all to those in the throes of war.

Psalms 88 begins, “O LORD, God of my salvation, at night, when I cry out before you, let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to the region of the dead...I am like those who have no help.”

What is your mental image of the person behind the writing of Psalm 88? Perhaps it is a furious man shaking his fist at God. Or maybe a bitter woman with her head in her hands and tears flowing. Or a person kneeling at the side of their bed grappling with news that has changed their life forever. Or a group of emaciated war survivors standing amid rubble in Gaza or Ukraine.

Many interpreters of this psalm believe that the person crying out to God in pain has a terminal illness. Some suggest it is someone with leprosy. They point to verse 8, which reads: “You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them.”

However, “the language is metaphorical and stereotypical enough to express other life-threatening situations.”² That’s one of the values of this psalm. Anyone suffering any disaster can relate to the anguish expressed in this psalm. If you suffer immense pain, you can make the words your own. If when you try to pray, you fumble your words, you can pray Psalm 88. That is why it is included in the Book of Psalms.

One commentator points out that the psalm is organized around three instances in which the person cries out to God. In verses one, nine, and 13, three different Hebrew words for “cry” or “call” are employed to emphasize that the one who is praying has exhausted every possible approach, but the result is still “darkness” which is literally the final word of the psalm.³

Listen again to verses 13 and 14: “But I, O LORD, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O LORD, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?”

The main thrust of the Psalm is not simply that something terrible has happened. Surely that is part of it. But the distress is heightened because in the eyes of the one who suffers, God isn't acting the way God is expected to act. The person's faith is crumbling. His belief that God would never allow his life to become so awful has been exposed as false. His notion that God keeps a protective bubble around the faithful has burst. Even beautiful people suffer terrible times.

Writing about Psalm 88 and the other psalms of Disorientation, Professor Brueggemann says, "It is no wonder that the church has intuitively avoided these psalms. They lead us into dangerous acknowledgment of how life really is. They lead us into the presence of God where everything is not polite and civil. They cause us to think unthinkable thoughts and utter unutterable words."⁴

Faith is not about pretending that life is rosy and the world is always fair. Faith is not about muffling our sorrow or stifling our protest. We cling to faith *despite* the pain. We cling to faith *despite* the chaos. We cling to faith *despite* the injustice in the world. Psalm 88 provides us with honest, heartfelt words to express our grief and to lodge our complaint.

Writer Martin Tel shares that one Sunday, his pastor built the worship liturgy and his sermon around Psalm 88. He called the psalm "the poster child for hopelessness." Later that afternoon his family had a couple from church over for coffee. "They had been in church that morning, and their conversation turned to Psalm 88. The couple found it to be deeply moving...(It resonated) with them because they are living in the aftermath of an unfathomable family loss...They experienced Psalm 88 as powerful and moving because, to their surprise, their own lonely prayer of hopelessness was uttered aloud in the church. And as their despair was voiced, the congregation gave expression to a hope the couple could not yet voice."⁵ But could hear even if only faintly.

We can be thankful that Psalm 88 was included in Holy Scripture because it does not attempt to sidestep the harsh realities of life. And not only does it not duck dark nights of the soul, it gives *voice* to the feelings we experience when life is terrifying. It gives us a green light to express our feelings of desperation when fear, confusion, and anger dominate us. There is healing in catharsis. This psalm not only says we *can* talk to God about our suffering and doubt, but we *must*.

And while this psalm fails to end on a promising note, it is important to remember that it is a prayer addressed to *God*. The Psalm is not a rant that there is no God. It begins by acknowledging that the One who creates is the One who saves. It is a prayer of distress that God isn't acting the way the person praying expects. The fact that the person utters a prayer reveals that he trusts God's fundamental character.

The Psalmist feels that he is covered in darkness. He may be dying or feel that he is as good as dead. And yet. If we peer closely, we see that the speaker clings to God – clings to hope – even if by the thinnest thread.

In the book, *When God Was Taken Captive: Finding Hope When Heaven Seems Silent*, James DeLoach talks about a painting he discovered. It was a picture of an old, burned-out mountain shack. All that remained was the chimney...the charred debris of what had been that family's sole possession. In front of the destroyed home stood an old, grandfatherly looking man dressed only in his underclothes with a small boy clutching a pair of patched overalls. The child was crying. Beneath the picture were the words the

artist felt the old man was saying to the boy: ‘Hush child, God ain’t dead!’ DeLoach said that painting of the burned-out mountain shack, that old man, the weeping child, and those words, ‘God ain’t dead’ was a reminder that all is not lost. That reminder is not just for him; it is for us, especially when life looks like a heap of rubble and God seems silent.”⁶

The question for us is this: Can we trust God, even in silence? And will we remember – as one writer put it – that “the last word today doesn’t have to be the final word for all time.”⁷

And while Psalm 88 can free us to speak honestly when easy answers will not suffice, we remember that Psalm 88 is not the only voice in Scripture. One of the core messages of the Bible is that God is present in the midst of human suffering. Whether it is the ancient Hebrew people oppressed by the Egyptians or the early Christians persecuted by the Romans or the Apostle Paul beaten for his beliefs or Jesus being crucified, the Scriptures tell us time and again that God is with us when we walk through the darkest valleys, and nothing can separate us from God’s love.

NOTES

1. Mitch Everingham, “Learning to Lament: A Guide to Praying in Our Hardest Moments,” February 23, 2023.
2. J. Clinton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IV*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 1027.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1028.
4. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), p. 53.
5. Martin Tel, “Necessary Songs: The Case for Singing the Entire Psalter,” *The Christian Century*, January 8, 2014.
6. Timothy W. Sloan, “Good Friday Sermon: ‘When God is Silent,’” *Journal for Preachers*, Spring 2024, p. 8.
7. Peter Choi, Deconstructed, reimagined faith: Five ways I see a new generation reorienting its Christianity,” *The Christian Century*, June 2023.

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Randall T. Clayton

Eternal God, in the midst of changing times and the big and small challenges we face daily, you continue to hold onto us, welcome us, and offer us pathways to peace and joy. You created this world of abundance and variety, and we bless you for it. When we were slaves in Egypt, you delivered us. When we strayed from your path, you sent prophets to call us back. When the time was right, you sent your Son to earth to redeem us. And so, this day we give you thanks and praise – praise for your constant love, praise that you stand with us when we face difficult days, praise for hope in the midst of despairing situations.

Despite your constant love and care for creation, many in our world are left out, or find doors closing, and hopes diminishing. We think of this day of so many who know first-hand the devastation of war or natural disaster. We remember this day those who are frightened of what tomorrow may bring and feel helpless to change the tides that swirl around them. We think too of those dealing with job loss, a loss of independence, a loss of health or some other loss. O God, where there is pain, bring healing. Where there are shattered hearts, bring comfort. Where fear reigns, bring hope. Where war and disaster bring havoc, bring peace. Where there is hunger, bring food; where medical care or housing or meaningful work is lacking, fill those needs with your love and your power. And when we find ourselves dancing with despair, without hope for tomorrow, or feeling that the burdens of today are almost too much to bear, remind us that you are with us, that you care, and that we never walk alone.

Gracious God, let your Spirit move among us, through us, and also in the bread and cup we share today. In our memory of your love and the taste of bread and juice, let the roots of our faith be nourished and the

bonds of our fellowship be strengthened. Through this meal, give us a new vision for how to share your love, that we might offer hope, hospitality, and gifts needed to sustain and enhance life across the globe.

We remember Jesus and his love, and remember too the prayer he taught us to say, praying...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.