

Psalm 88 may be the saddest prayer in the psalter because no one wants to ever have to pray this prayer. Death and dying are tough subjects under any circumstances, but the conditions described in this psalm are the worst imaginable. The psalmist has hit rock bottom in every way. He is already half dead with one foot in the grave. He is physically spent, emotionally crushed, utterly alone, and abandoned by friends. He feels utterly rejected by everyone including the Lord. He is overwhelmed by his troubles and drowning under the breaking waves of God's the wrath.

The lament psalms usually give some hint of hope or glimmer of praise, but there is nothing positive here. The psalm ends where Simon and Garfunkels' 1964 ballad "Sound of Silence" begins, "Hello, darkness my old friend." The whole psalm from beginning to end is more like a loud, painful wail from the hospice bed than anything else. Yet, it is in Jesus' prayer book. Why?

I shared with my friend who turned eighty this year that we were praying for my wife's ninety-four year old father. We prayed that he would remain mentally and physically healthy right up until he died. We suspected that institutional care would break him and we hoped he would be spared that grief. My friend shot back, "We all pray for that, but it doesn't usually work out that way."

However, in my father-in-law's case it did. The prayer was answered. On the weekend before he died he went to the gym on his own and to the movies with his son. On Sunday he went to church and then to a concert at night with friends. Coming out of the concert his walker got caught in a crack in the sidewalk and he fell. Two days later he died in the hospital from internal bleeding. An hour before he died he quoted Proverbs 3:5-6 in four languages including, Chiluba, French, and Portuguese. He had acquired these languages over a lifetime of missionary service. Shortly before he died he told my brother-in-law, "I'm homesick for heaven."

I would love to go that way. We all would, but for some of us, the dying process will be so extreme that we will end up praying Psalm 88. Dying can be very cruel, an unmitigated horror, even for those take Jesus at his word: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" (John 11:25). Such is the frailty and weakness of the human condition that such a prayer needs to be in our prayer book and we need to know it is there.

Overwhelmed

*Lord [Yahweh], 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.
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 from 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.
You have taken from my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them.
I am confined and cannot escape;
my eyes are dim with grief.*

Psalm 88:1-9a

The more we grasp the gritty faith of the psalmist the more we will understand why this sad psalm is in the Psalter. His resilient faith is evident in this extreme prayer in five ways: First, he is not silent, he prays, and that fact alone is no small feat. Second, he persists in calling out to the God who saves him. After all is said and done God is his salvation. Third, he credits the sovereignty of God with everything, even his suffering. He lets God be God. Nothing that happens to him is blamed on secondary causes. Fourth, the psalmist believes that to live is to behold God's wonders and experience his love. He rests his case for deliverance on witnessing the faithfulness of God in the land of the living. Our mission is to praise God. Fifth, everything comes down to God and him. As far from God as he may feel, it is his relationship with God that matters most to him and upon which everything else depends.

I had a colleague once who often complained of being "overwhelmed." She used the word freely to describe the normal pressures of daily work. But that is not how the psalmist is using the word. He is overwhelmed with all his troubles and is on the verge of death. He is in a life and death situation and death is winning. What he chose to do in that situation is more remarkable than any seemingly hopeless thing that he might have said, because his words are sanctified through prayer. He is not just talking, he's praying. All those ugly, disparaging groans and indictments are safe in the supplicant's privileged communion with God. If attorney - client privilege is special it is nothing compared to the believer's protected speech in prayer. The reason Psalm 88 is in the Psalter is because God gives us permission to pray this way. Broken-hearted, soul-despairing, life-on-the-line prayers are redemptive no matter how dark and tragic they may sound to those who overhear them. God invites these wrenching prayers and even promises to pray through them. "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans" (Rom 8:26).

Sin and perversion are found in the alternatives: silence and escape. The great danger is when the nursing home patient or the distraught widow or the addicted teen shuts down and withdraws into their private hell. For believers to refuse to vent their raw emotion in prayer or to cloak their prayers in pious cliches is the greater danger, because it turns the sufferer inward upon himself. It

is naive to think that believers are not tempted to turn to opium and its derivatives instead of prayer. Hydrocodone and oxycodone are the drugs of choice for people trying to escape the kind of pain described in Psalm 88. When these drugs are carefully administered to relieve pain they serve a necessary purpose. Most of us have personally experienced the positive benefit of pain medications. It is when these drugs are over prescribed and abused that they end up doing more harm than good. Although hydrocodone and oxycodone were not available to the psalmist, the cultivation of the poppy plant goes back as far as six thousand years. Andrew Sullivan reports that Homer called it a “wondrous substance.” The eighth century B.C. Greek poet marveled that those who consumed opium “did not shed a tear all day long, even if their mother or father had died, even if a brother or beloved son was killed before their own eyes.” “For millennia,” writes Sullivan, opium has “salved pain” and “suspended grief.”¹ The psalmist boldly testifies to his need to pray, especially in the valley of the shadow of death. The dark night of the soul has no purpose other than prayer and any retreat from prayer into drugs or despair rejects the honesty of Psalm 88.

The psalmist’s lament is passionately God-directed even though his extreme pain and grief renders his plea self-centered. He defines himself in four disturbing “I am” statements: “I am overwhelmed with troubles. . . .I am on the verge of death. . . .I am without strength. . . .I am as good as dead” (Ps 88:3-5).² But then he takes his lament a step further and credits God for his dire circumstances in four indictment statements: “You have put me in the lowest pit. . . .Your wrath lies heavily on me. . . .You have overwhelmed me. . . .You have taken from me my closest friends” (Ps 88:6-8). The psalmist has no patience for secondary causes. No mention is made of sickness and disease or enemies and foes. Implicit in his lament is his faith in the sovereignty of God and the conviction that nothing happens to him apart from the will of God. He does not waste his energy blaming others or bemoaning his actions. This is all between God and himself. His final “I am” statement brings this section to a close: “I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief” (Ps 88:8-9a).

Appealing for Deliverance

*I call to you, Lord, every day;
I spread out my hands to you.
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,*

¹ Andrew Sullivan, Andrew Sullivan on the Opioid Epidemic in American, New York Magazine, February, 2018. <https://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2018/02/americas-opioid-epidemic.html>

² Augustine, Psalms 88, sec.1, 4, 424. Augustine insists on a verse-by-verse messianic interpretation of Psalm 88. He hears “the voice of Christ” in every line of prophecy. In some cases it is easy to hear echoes of Psalm 88, for example when Jesus in Gethsemane said, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38; Ps 88:3). In other cases it is more difficult. Augustine relates the meaning of Ps 88:5, which he translates, “free among the dead,” to Jesus’ statement, “I have authority to lay it [my life] down and authority to take it up again” (John 10:18). Calvin, Psalms, vol.5, 409. Calvin bluntly refuted Augustine’s “refined interpretation,” saying, “. . .That Christ is here described, and that he is said to be free among the dead, because he obtained victory over death . . . has no connection with the meaning of the passage.”

or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?
Psalm 88:9b-12

For a second time the psalmist makes a passionate plea for deliverance. His body language reflects his intensity. He is probably on his knees or stretched out on the ground with his hands palm's up beseeching God. Implicit in his appeal is the chief end of man – to glorify and praise God. He reasons that if he is dead he can no longer behold the wonders of God. If he dies he cannot return as a “shadow” to praise the Lord. If goes down to the grave he cannot testify to the faithfulness of God. His appeal is God-honoring rather than self-serving and his reasoning reveals a child of the covenant who thinks and acts according to the love and righteousness of God. If God wants the testimony of his faithfulness to continue in the life of the psalmist then he will have to be saved from “this unwarranted and fast-approaching death.”³

We can imagine Jesus praying this psalm in the days leading up to the crucifixion. He identified with the psalmist's sorrow and fear of imminent death, but unlike the psalmist he understood that his death and resurrection were crucial to the revelation of God's love and faithfulness. He prayed to the Father, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do” (John 17:4). Instead of death ending his testimony; death was the necessary fulfillment of his testimony. The author of Hebrews describes Christ appearing “once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb 9:26). This is why the apostle Paul said, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

Unresolved Lament

*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.*

Psalm 88:13-18

The lament psalms invariably reach resolution in praise, but this psalm is the exception that proves the rule. This last section repeats the difficult themes of the first: rejection, isolation, abandonment, and fear of death. The psalmist adds a depressing note: “From my youth I have suffered and been close to death.” This indicates that he has suffered a lifelong debilitating and

³ Ross, Psalms, 811.

deadly illness. Not only is his lament intensive but extensive. Perpetual pain has been the story of this person's life. Psalm 88 gives voice to the many faithful believers who live with intense chronic pain and life-draining weakness. Anderson says the Psalm "creates an impression of unrelieved gloom without a ray of light," which begs the question why this afflicted person prays at all.⁴ The fact that his passionate cry for help is directed to the Lord and punctuates the Psalm three times testifies to his utter dependence on the Lord. The psalmist is like Job who at the point of his greatest bondage and fear proved the depth of his faith precisely because he had no worldly reason to trust in God.

We want resolution for our pain and grief and the degree to which we want it often corresponds to the intensity of our pain. Whether we plead with God three times or a thousand times, we may hear the Lord say, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Earlier I shared how our prayers for my father-in-law were answered. He was physically, mentally and spiritually active right up to his death at the age of 94. This was not the case however, with my mother-in-law Merry. She was diagnosed with multiple myeloma twelve years before she died and she suffered the ravages of both the disease and chemo-therapy. The cancer spread throughout her body resulting in extreme pain that never let up. Drugs and radiation of the brain caused a fundamental personality change that hallowed out this beautiful, fun-loving, God-fearing mother and grandmother. My father-in-law could say at the end, "I'm homesick for heaven," but I remember when Merry, who never swore, woke up one morning and said, "Oh, hell, I'm still here! I dreamed that I had died and gone to heaven."

⁴ Anderson, *Psalms (73-150)*, 623.