

## Preaching the Darkest Psalm

### *Psalm 88*

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THIRTY YEARS AGO, WHEN I began my teaching career at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, I was asked to teach an elective class on the book of Psalms. Since I had never even *taken* a course on Psalms—let alone taught one!—it was something of a challenge. Yet, I immersed myself in the book of Psalms and the secondary literature that summer and managed to make my way through the term without prompting a student revolt. And, in the process, I learned much more than my students did, things that I treasure to this day.

Among the things I read was Walter Brueggemann's seminal essay on "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function,"<sup>2</sup> in which he proposed to look at the psalms through a completely different lens from the one that form criticism had used for the better part of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> He spoke of three "orientations," each of which takes

1 This essay first appeared in *Preaching Magazine*, Sept/Oct 2012, 38–43, and is used with permission.

2. Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith," 3–32. A more accessible presentation of this typology may be found in his *Spirituality of the Psalms*.

3. The father of form criticism was Hermann Gunkel, who laid out the classic form-critical categories—praise, thanksgiving, lament, etc.—in his magisterial *Einleitung in Die Psalmen*; English translation: *Introduction to the Psalms*. A more accessible presentation is his *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*. His work has been refined by many, including Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, and

into account what the worshiper's stance (or "orientation") toward God is as he (or they) prays. The three categories are as follows:

1. Psalms of *orientation*, where the psalmists are in tune with God, life seems to be clicking on all cylinders, and all is well (represented primarily by creation, Torah, and wisdom psalms<sup>4</sup>).
2. Psalms of *dislocation* (or *disorientation*), where the psalmists feel estranged from God, life seems to have been turned upside down, and nothing seems to make sense (represented mainly by the laments).
3. Psalms of *reorientation* (or *new orientation*), where the psalmists are reconciled to God, life is good and well ordered again, and the emotional highs are palpable (represented by the thanksgiving and praise psalms). The difference from the psalms of orientation is that the psalms of reorientation usually acknowledge the tragedies of life, but from the perspective of their having been overcome by God's actions (thanksgivings), and they usually reflect an exuberance toward God that is mostly absent in the psalms of orientation (especially in the praise psalms).

In Brueggemann's discussion of the psalms of disorientation, he took particular note of Psalm 88 as the most extreme example of such a psalm. In contrast to the other psalms of disorientation, which typically end with some expression of trust or thanksgiving or praise, this psalm has none of these elements. It is a very dark psalm, and it simply ends on a very dark note.

It was the first time I had noticed what seemed to be the utter hopelessness of the psalm, and it was somewhat unnerving. What should I think about such a psalm? What could I say to my students about such a psalm? How could I preach such a psalm?

I had no answers, so I did the next best thing: I completely ignored the psalm and hoped that my students would not ask any questions about it. And it worked! For almost a decade, I managed to get through discussions on the Psalms without having to discuss this one.

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Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1; with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry and Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*.

4. In this essay, Brueggemann included also the hymns, since "they anticipate or remember no change," i.e., they reflect an orderly status quo (p. 7). In his later writings, he included most hymns in the third category, psalms of *reorientation* (e.g., *Spirituality of the Psalms*, 55–57).

Cowardly as it was, my avoidance of this psalm—and others like it—was not too far from what most Christians prefer to do regarding such psalms. I do not recall ever hearing a sermon from any lament psalm that addressed the lament itself head-on, except perhaps Psalm 22 as it applies to Christ’s suffering, or scattered, out-of-context references to particular verses from one of these psalms. The church seems to be loath to address the full force and implications of the psalmists when they express anger with their situations, or even, it seems, at God himself.

Sheila Carney has addressed this concern in a provocatively titled article in which she pleads for an honest handling of such psalms in the context of the community of believers.<sup>5</sup> Speaking of unbelievers who would utter the blasphemous words of her title, she says, “For such persons, the community provides no stability, God is no anchor, the covenant has no meaning.” Her point is that for believers, the opposite is true: the believing community *does* provide stability, God *is* an anchor, and the covenant is all-important.

In such a context of community, the church should welcome the difficult psalms into church life, and pastors should not shrink (as I did) from preaching from these psalms. Perhaps an exclusive diet of these psalms in public worship is not what is called for, but certainly their bold proclamation from the pulpit occasionally, and their use in other settings, including the counseling room, can help believers to embrace the full counsel of Scripture, including the difficult psalms.

So the longer I ignored Psalm 88, the more my conscience spoke to me that I should stop being such a coward, that I needed to tackle this psalm head-on in order to help my students and laypeople deal with such a difficult text. So finally, when I was asked to preach a two-part series in my home church one summer, I decided to do so. I preached the first week on “Praising God in the Good Times,” choosing as my text, Psalm 113, one of the great praise psalms, and the second week on “Praising God in the Bad Times,” choosing Psalm 88 as the text.

I worked hard on that sermon, undertaking my own original translation from the Hebrew three months in advance of the date when I was

5. Carney, “God Damn God: A Reflection On Expressing Anger in Prayer,” 116–20. I certainly do not endorse her title—but neither does she, in fact: she is simply quoting what some people feel about God sometimes. Nor do I endorse some of her individual points, but her central thesis that the “cursing psalms” are undeservedly ignored in the church is well taken, as are some of her suggestions for a holistic approach to the psalms and a healthy appropriation of even the most difficult psalms.

to preach.<sup>6</sup> In those three months, Psalm 88 was never far from my mind. Finally, during the week before the sermon, I organized my thoughts, and then sat down to write the sermon on Saturday evening (ever the procrastinator!). Six hours later I was done.

I had coordinated with the worship team about the sermon, and so one of the hymns we sang that Sunday morning was Horatio Spafford's "It Is Well with My Soul." It is a wonderful hymn of trust in God. To the uninitiated, it might sound like the product of someone who knows nothing of the hardships of life. But in reality, Spafford wrote this hymn after he had suffered great loss: he lost his four-year-old son to scarlet fever in 1871 and that same year his business was completely destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire. Then, scarcely two years later, his four daughters perished aboard a ship that sank in mid-Atlantic. Incredibly, Spafford conceived of this hymn shortly after this, as he was on board another ship and passing over the very spot where his daughters had died.<sup>7</sup>

I preached the sermon on that Sunday morning, and it was received enthusiastically. Three to four times the number of people who would normally thank me for a sermon came to me to thank me for this one, many deeply moved and with tears in their eyes. I have preached it a number of times since, and I now routinely use it in my classes when we discuss the Psalms, and the feedback is very much the same.

And so, I present that sermon below, unchanged since it was first preached at Liberty Community Church in Lindenhurst, Illinois on July 14, 1991 (except for the later addition of the Romans 8:26 reference).

My prayer is that it will help others to see and experience God even in the hardest of times.

### **"Praising God in the Bad Times"**

Joe and Marylou Bayly were a real-life couple whom God tested beyond what I think I could ever begin to endure. Joe was in the Lord's work, working in a Christian organization with students and writing for

6. That translation may be found in the scholarly essay that I recently published on the psalm: "Psalm 88 and the Rhetoric of Lament," 132–46; the translation is on p. 138.

7. The story of "It Is Well With My Soul" is well known and easily accessible in books such as this one: Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*, 126–28. It also is told in any number of Internet sites, such as this one: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/11/01/the-true-story-behind-the-hymn-it-is-well-with-my-soul/> (accessed January 16, 2012).

Christian magazines. They had a happy family. They had three sons, and a daughter.

Then, tragedy struck. One of their young sons developed leukemia. At the age of five, he died.

As Joe tells it in a book he wrote afterwards, Danny died in his own bed, with his mother and father next to him, comforting him, loving him, and telling him about Jesus' love and heaven.<sup>8</sup>

The family had always spoken of these things, and Danny had responded with the simple faith of a child in what his parents said.

But, this day, Danny did not want to go to heaven. He wanted to stay, to be with his mom and dad, his brothers and his sister, in his own home. He didn't want to leave all that he knew.

But, he did. He did leave. He died that day.

Then, God gave the Baylys the hope of new life again. They were expecting another baby, and they rejoiced. But, when the day came, the baby was born with a severe handicap. They named him John, but on the second day of his life, he too died.

The Baylys had lost two children. It has been said that the most severe trauma a parent can suffer is to undergo the death of a child. Statistics show that divorce rates skyrocket in families in which a child dies, when neither parent can reach out to the other beyond his or her own grief. Yet, the Baylys lost two sons.

But, God was not finished with them yet. A few short years later, their eighteen-year-old son, Joe, had a freak sledding accident. He was a hemophiliac, and he bled to death.

Seven years. Three sons. Three deaths.

Joseph Bayly wrote a poem after the death of his son Joe. Here is part of it:

Let me alone, Lord, you've taken from me what I'd give your world. I cannot see such waste that you should take what poor men need. You have a heaven full of treasure; could you not wait to exercise your claim on this? O spare me, Lord, forgive, that I may see beyond this world, beyond myself, Your sovereign plan, or seeing not, may trust You, Spoiler of my treasure. Have mercy, Lord, here is my quitclaim.<sup>9</sup>

8. Bayly, *The Last Thing We Talk About*, 34; originally published as *The View From a Hearse*.

9. Bayly, *Psalms of My Life*, 40.

## Introduction to Psalm 88.

Our psalm for today is a psalm for the bad times, for people in spots like the Baylys found themselves in. There are many psalms that teach us how to praise God in the good times, and, indeed, that's what many people think of when they think of the psalms: praising. But, it is interesting to note there are just as many psalms that teach us how to relate to God in the bad times as in the good times. The book of Psalms does not hide from the difficult issues of life.

These psalms for the bad times are called “laments,” and roughly half of the Psalter is made up of them. A typical pattern is that the psalmist addresses God, tells God of his overwhelming troubles, asks God to hear his prayer, and then thanks God for hearing and answering his prayer. This last part is either from the perspective of expressing confidence that God will do this, and so he is promising to thank and praise God when he does answer, or else from the perspective of God's actually having answered the prayer; it's as though a time gap is there, and in the last verses of the psalm, the psalmist thanks God for his deliverance.

Psalm 88 is a lament, and it fits the lament pattern somewhat. But, it is unique in the Psalter—there is no other psalm like it—because it presents such a bleak picture. It *has* no praise at the end. It just ends. It ends on a very depressing note. It ends with a horrible groan. One commentator has called it the “darkest corner of the Psalter.”<sup>10</sup>

### Let's Read Psalm 88 (Please Follow Along as I Read It)

#### Cry of Distress (vv. 1–2)

The psalm begins with an anguished cry of distress (vv. 1–2). We should notice two things here. First, it is addressed to the Lord, “the God of my salvation” (v. 1a [RSV]; NIV: “the God who saves me”). Despite the fact that the psalmist is in a position where he feels overwhelmed by life—and even by God—he still acknowledges that this is *his* God, the God of his salvation (or deliverance).

Second, we should notice that this psalm is a “prayer” (v. 2a). Despite the overwhelmingly despairing note in the psalm, it is still a prayer, and it is addressed to God (see also v. 13).

10. White, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*.

Both of these points show us that the psalmist is not an atheist. He still prays to God, to *his* God.

The psalm quickly moves on, though. The psalmist is not interested in affirming this God, but rather in pouring out his troubles before him, and even in questioning him.

### The Psalmist's Troubles (vv. 3–5)

In verses 3–5 we have his first recital of his troubles, and it is an impressive list. This section is permeated with images of death (Sheol, the Pit, the grave, the dead, the slain, defiled bodies). The psalmist has not died, but he uses these images to illustrate how serious his troubles are. It's an overwhelming picture of darkness and despair painted here.

### God's Afflictions (vv. 6–9)

The psalmist now points to God as the source of his problems in verses 6–9. *God* has brought him down, down to the very depths (v. 6). Here again we have the darkest images imaginable: God has brought down to the lowest pit, the dark places, the depths (v. 6). The psalmist feels the weight of God's wrath, of his angry breakers crashing over him (v. 7).

And, perhaps worst of all, God has removed his friends from him; there is no one he can turn to! He is utterly alone in life (v. 8). We ourselves know from experience that the support of family, friends, and church people is crucial in helping us through the crises of life. But this psalmist feels as though he has none of these (and he states this even more forcefully at the end of the psalm, in v. 18).

The psalmist feels overwhelmed: he is trapped, and he cannot get out (v. 8c). He can't see: his eye is dimmed with grief (v. 9a). He calls out to God, in a seemingly futile attempt to get him to listen (vv. 9b-c).

### Questions for God (vv. 10–12)

As a result of all of this, the psalmist turns to the only one he can, to God, and he has a series of six questions for God in verses 10–12. They all are variations on one theme: the dead do not praise God. Each question in these verses mentions the realm of the dead, along with something about God's goodness.

There are two assumptions in these verses. The first is that the psalmist feels troubled even by the threat of death, either literally or metaphorically. A second assumption, more importantly, is that the psalmist equates praising God, testifying to his goodness—his steadfast love, his faithfulness, his righteousness, his wonderful works—with *life*. One commentator has noted that, for the psalmists, the relationship between praising and not praising was the same as that between living and not living.<sup>11</sup> If you were alive, you were praising God.

This thought is expressed a little more clearly in a passage from Psalm 30 (another lament) (Ps. 30:9): “What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?”

In this passage we can see that the psalmist assumes that while he is alive, he will praise God. So too in Psalm 88, this assumption is behind the questions in verses 10–12. The psalmist’s request for deliverance is not self-centered or self-serving, some sort of instinctual primal scream that displays the survival instinct of our species. No, it is an anguished and tormented request—yet a reasoned one—that he be spared, *so that he can praise and glorify God!* It comes out of an experience in the past where there was a better relationship with God. It is a request born out of faith in God as one who *could* deliver him, and as one whom the psalmist *wants* to praise, even if he cannot bring himself to do so right now.

### Final Cries of Distress and Affliction (vv. 13–18)

The psalmist concludes the psalm by giving another desperate litany of his troubles in vv. 13–18, crying out to God and describing in more detail the ways in which God is afflicting him. The psalmist uses almost every image imaginable to get his point across. He speaks of God rejecting him, of his being afflicted—and even dying—from the days of his youth (vv. 14–15), of God’s terrors, his burning anger, his dreaded assaults (vv. 15–16), passing and swirling over him (vv. 16–17).

The psalmist ends on a depressing note (v. 18), that God has taken away his closest supports, and all he has left is darkness. English translations differ on how exactly to translate the last verse of the psalm. For example, the NASB reads “You have removed lover and friend far from me;

11. Westerman, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*.



my acquaintances are in darkness.” The NIV reads “You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.”

I would suggest something similar, but I note that the text ends with a single word—“darkness”—that can easily and legitimately be seen as a final gasp or moan, a final cry of desperation, as follows: “You have removed far away from me the one who loves me and the one who is my friend, namely, those who know me!” The psalm then ends with this one stark, anguished word, a despairing cry: “Oh, Darkness!” It is like the character in Joseph Conrad’s novel, *Heart of Darkness*, who, as he faced death and looked back over a totally corrupt life that he had lived, uttered his dying, despairing words: “The horror! The horror!” Darkness is all that the psalmist can see as he looks out around him. There is nothing left for him, it seems.

## Conclusion

So, what can we learn from this psalm? Is there anything to learn from such a sad and bleak text?

Yes, we can learn from this psalm. I believe it teaches us at least two things. *First*, it shows us that, even in the midst of the worst circumstances, it still is possible to talk to God, to have a relationship with him. Remember, for one thing, that the psalmist is “praying” here (vv. 2, 13). He is not praying very happy thoughts, but he is still praying—he is still talking to God. In spite of his perception that God has caused his troubles, he still believes God is close enough to hear him. Remember also that the psalmist still affirms his relationship with God: he calls him the “God of my salvation” (v. 1). Despite the strain and the distance, the psalmist still acknowledges God. Finally, remember that the psalmist assumes that praise is the normal mode of life, and he wants to return to that mode (vv. 10–12). He mentions God’s attributes, such as his steadfast love, his faithfulness, his righteousness, his wonderful works.

So, even this saddest of psalms affirms God.

But, we would be dishonest to the text if we were to say that this is the full message, or even the major message, of the psalm. The glimpses into the praise of God in this psalm are only that: fleeting glimpses. What this psalm gives us a much clearer picture of is lament, distress, depression, darkness, despair. These images are clear, powerful, and unrelenting. The psalm paints a dark picture over and over again, and it ends on this dark note.

So, a *second* thing we learn from this psalm is that it is part of a believer's experience in life to feel depressed, even to feel so depressed as to have nothing good to say to God. The psalmist can barely gasp a few hints about his positive feelings toward God; his true feelings are overwhelmingly negative.

In the mid-1980s, my wife Jan and I went through some very dark times. We were wanting to start a family, but it was not happening. We applied to an adoption agency, but things seemed to move at a snail's pace. We prayed consistently about this, but it seemed as though the Lord was not answering us. Well, as it turned out, he did indeed marvelously answer our prayers, giving us the two daughters that we now have, via adoption, and we wouldn't trade them for the world! They are more precious to us than life itself.

But, the depth of the despair in the time of waiting was very real. It was indeed a dark time for us, especially for Jan, who comes from a family of *nine* children. All we wanted was *one*!

Jan felt overwhelmed by God, even angry with him. She tells me of one time when we were going to have a time of prayer together, and I asked her if she wanted to pray. She was at a point where she felt she had nothing left to say to God, that she was spiritually and emotionally drained. She felt in some ways the way that the author of Psalm 88 felt, and so she said no, she didn't want to pray.

Now I've done a lot of things wrong in our marriage over the years, but one thing I did right was on that day (I know it was right, because Jan has told me so). My response was quick and short, but it was obviously the right one for that moment: "OK, I'll pray." Jan says she felt a big release, and a measure of understanding, that, when she couldn't summon the energy to pray, in some way it was OK.

It was OK with me, because I knew she had not abandoned her faith. She (and I) had many questions, but she was not turning her back on God. She just couldn't face him directly at that time, and she certainly couldn't mouth the great praises of God that are present in so much of the Psalter. She would not have felt comfortable reading some of the great praise psalms in the Psalter; she would have felt much better reading Psalm 88. But, she sat through our prayer time together, by her very presence silently affirming her relationship with God, even though at that time she could barely understand this God, this God who seemed to be blocking us from what we so earnestly desired.

There is much to be said about silence and pain. Sometimes we hear God more clearly in our pain. C. S. Lewis said (in an excellent book entitled *The Problem of Pain*) that “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is [God’s] megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>12</sup> And, God himself helps us in our weakest hours. Paul writes in Romans 8:26: “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (NIV).

But, we ask, what right does God have to inflict or to allow such pain, such distress, as was experienced by the Bayly family, or by the psalmist of Psalm 88? What does he know of pain?

The answer is that God does indeed know of pain. He subjected himself to it on our behalf. He himself gave his own Son, his only Son to be tortured and killed. As a father, God must have suffered unspeakable pain at some level. And, God the Son obviously suffered. He knows what our pain is like.

Yet, God also knows our limitations. Psalm 103:14 says that “he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.” We may very well have times in which we cannot bring our lips even to utter a word to God, certainly not a word of praise to him. The words get stuck in our throats. Yet, the very fact that Psalm 88 is in the Bible—that it wasn’t “censored” and deleted from the Bible as some sacrilegious aberration from what should be the “correct” way of relating to God—this very fact tells us that it is OK to be silent or to question God severely in our distresses.

What are your distresses today? The nice thing about the psalms is that they are so general; we can plug in our own individual troubles in the appropriate spots, and pray right along with the psalmists.

Have you ever felt like Joseph Bayly did at the death of his son Joe? Then pray a prayer like he did: “O spare me, Lord, forgive, that I may see beyond this world, beyond myself, Your sovereign plan, or seeing not, may trust you.” Pray a prayer like Psalm 88. Ask God to help you trust him, even when you can’t see the big picture. Don’t feel guilty that you can’t pray the great praises found elsewhere in the Psalter. Those are for another time, and they will come in time. Just don’t let go of God completely. Remember the words of the writer of “It Is Well With My Soul,” whose story we heard about this morning, who lost his family at sea.

12. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 93.

Remember, too, the mature faith of Daniel's three friends, when they were to be thrown to their deaths in a fiery furnace if they would not bow down to the Babylonian king's statue. Here's what Daniel's friends said (Dan 3:17–18, NIV): "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God [whom] we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

*"Even if he does not."* That is the nature of the "praise" that we are to offer up to God in our weakest hours. God does not require us to sing, with Bobby McFerrin, in his Grammy-Award-winning song of a few years ago, "Don't Worry, Be Happy!" He only wants us not to abandon him; he wants us to cling to him, "the God of our salvation," so that in due time, when we can, we may again praise him.

### Postscript

The above sermon was written to minister to people who are in the "disorientation" mode of life. It is a legitimate mode in which believers may find themselves, and the insights from Psalm 88 should help such persons.

But, praise be to God, believers do not need to remain in such a mode forever. The psalms and Christian experience both give abundant evidence of God's grace and a "way out" of such a mode. My wife and I can testify today that we would not trade the painful experience of infertility even if we could. For one thing, we never would have met our two daughters, who are now in their twenties and whom we still love more than life itself. We cannot imagine life without them. For another, that searing experience helped shape who we are today. In contrast to our relatively self-sufficient lives up to that point, this experience showed us that we did not have full control of those lives. We could not fix our own situation (and the attendant feelings), so we were forced into more dependence on God. Today we rejoice in the lessons of dependence on him that we learned—and are still learning!—hard as they were (and are). And, finally, the experience opened our eyes to many hurting people whom we might have looked right past had we not had this experience, and we have been able to minister to such people because of what we thought of as our travails and God's "unfairness" to us. Not in our own strength, of course, but in the spirit of comfort that Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 1:3–4:

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

So, Jan and I now live in a mode of “new orientation,” having learned many lessons. But, that does not obviate the need for the church to address those who are not there yet, who are living in the deepest disorientation. In the words of the sermon, “[God] only wants us not to abandon him; he wants us to cling to him, ‘the God of our salvation,’ so that in due time, when we can, we may again praise him.” For those in great distress even Psalm 88 can offer some measure of comfort and hope.

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