

The One With No Turn  
Psalm 88  
July 26, 2020  
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## I

A few years ago, I was called upon to testify in court. It was a simple probate hearing, and all I was asked to do was to affirm that to the best of my knowledge, my late friend had no other surviving heirs other than those already named before the court. But even though it was a simple hearing, I was nervous before the bench, and when the judge, a very kind woman, asked me a simple question, I blurted out, “Yes, sir.” She just smiled over the top of her glasses at me, and I said, “Oh, I’m so sorry, yes, ma’am.” I’m sure my face was five different shades of red.

When I’m praying and I picture God in my mind, I tend to see the image of a judge. And I’ve noticed that when I pray, I sometimes sound like a witness or an attorney addressing the court. I tend to be very deferential and respectful in my words and tone, even when I’m bringing a petition or a lament before God’s throne.

## II

In our Presbyterian way of being the church, we tend to place a premium on the notion of the sovereignty and majesty and power of God. That emphasis on God’s sovereignty often comes out in our worship, in our hymns and prayers and the way in which we strive to do things in the church decently and in order. Of course, those are just generalizations, and there can be quite a bit of variety of course from one congregation to the next, but I think that for the most part, we Presbyterians try to conduct ourselves reverently and respectfully before God. Which is why I think Psalm 88 sounds so shocking to our ears. Ryan’s abridged translation of Psalm 88 sounds something like this. “God, I’m dying, and you don’t even care. In fact, I’m pretty sure this is all your fault. My family and friends have abandoned me, and I’m in darkness, and it’s because of you. The end.”

## III

This summer, we’ve been preaching our way through the Book of Psalms, and as we’ve said all along, the Book of Psalms isn’t a book at all in the classical sense, but rather an anthology, a collection of 150 poems and prayers and hymns that was gathered and edited over a long period of time in biblical history.

It’s been said that every emotion that we’re capable of feeling and expressing can be found expressed somewhere within the 150 psalms, and 2/3 of the psalms can be classified as psalms of lament. In a lament psalm, the psalmist brings some sort of

complaint or petition to God's attention, and in a typical lament psalm, God hears and acts on the petition and moves in some way, the psalmist is restored, and the psalm concludes with words of praise and thanksgiving for God's faithfulness. If these psalms were set to a music, as they were almost certainly meant to be, psalms of lament begin in a minor key, but usually end with a major chord.

But not Psalm 88.

Listen now for a Word from God as we turn to Psalm 88.

*1 O Lord, God of my salvation,*

*when, at night, I cry out in your presence,*

*2 let my prayer come before you;*

*incline your ear to my cry.*

*3 For my soul is full of troubles,*

*and my life draws near to Sheol.*

*4 I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;*

*I am like those who have no help,*

*5 like those forsaken among the dead,*

*like the slain that lie in the grave,*

*like those whom you remember no more,*

*for they are cut off from your hand.*

*6 You have put me in the depths of the Pit,*

*in the regions dark and deep.*

*7 Your wrath lies heavy upon me,*

*and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah*

*8 You have caused my companions to shun me;*

*you have made me a thing of horror to them.*

*I am shut in so that I cannot escape;*

*9 my eye grows dim through sorrow.*

*Every day I call on you, O Lord;*

*I spread out my hands to you.*

*10 Do you work wonders for the dead?*

*Do the shades rise up to praise you?Selah*

*11 Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,*

*or your faithfulness in Abaddon?*

*12 Are your wonders known in the darkness,*

*or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?*

*13 But I, O Lord, cry out to you;*

*in the morning my prayer comes before you.*

*14 O Lord, why do you cast me off?*

*Why do you hide your face from me?*

*15 Wretched and close to death from my youth up,*

*I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.[a]*

*16 Your wrath has swept over me;*

*your dread assaults destroy me.*

*17 They surround me like a flood all day long;*

*from all sides they close in on me.*

*18 You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;*

*my companions are in darkness.*

Walter Brueggemann is one of the world's preeminent Old Testament scholars, and he calls Psalm 88 "an embarrassment to conventional faith." I think what Brueggemann means by the term "conventional faith" is the idea that sure, bad things happen to us sometimes. Sometimes, really bad things happen to us. But if you just pray about it faithfully and diligently, eventually God will fix it and make it all better. And certainly, there are many psalms in the bible that bear that out.

But not Psalm 88. The final word in Psalm 88 is darkness. God has yet to move or respond to the petition of the psalmist, but you can't argue that it was because the prayers of the psalmist weren't fervent or bold enough. Day and night the psalmist prays. And not just a "hey, if you get around to it, if it's not too much to ask" kind of prayer. The psalmist is dying. There is no time for pulling punches or mincing words.

*You have put me in the depths of the Pit,*

*You* overwhelm me with all your waves.

*You* have caused friend and neighbor to shun me; and my companions are in darkness.

The final word of Psalm 88 is darkness.

#### IV

Maybe, my friend, you've never been in so dark a place. It's certainly not a text that you'll find on a cross stitch or greeting card. But even so, I'm so thankful that Psalm 88 is in the bible.

And here's why. As I mentioned, the psalms were collected over a long period of time. There was an editorial process to putting together the psalter, which means at some point, someone or several someones got together to make some decisions about what would make the final cut.

And I imagine there was not much fuss over Psalm 23 and the metaphor of the Lord as a shepherd. I imagine there was not much fuss over Psalm 42 and the simile of a deer longing for a drink of water as our souls long for God.

But I imagine that there was a long conversation about whether or not to even include Psalm 88 at all. I mean, the basic message of Psalm 88 is, "God, this hurts, it's your fault, I'm dying, I'm praying with everything I've got, and you're not answering. The end." If you're trying to put together a book that puts God in the best possible light, that's just not good PR.

But the Bible is not about putting God in the best possible light. The Bible is about how it really is with God. And sometimes, Psalm 88 is how it really is with God.

I remember so vividly the night I was paged to the bedside of a 23 year old woman. She was dying of end-stage AIDS, and when her family had learned that she had contracted the HIV virus, they had cast her out. She was homeless, penniless, death was very nearby, and she was utterly alone. As I sat at her bedside, listening to her story, I knew that "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," as true and as hopeful as that thought may be, she wasn't in a place to pray that psalm. And so we read and prayed together Psalm 88.

Sometimes, you pray and pray and pray, you pray so hard that it seems like you might be about to sweat blood, and yet it feels like you're just filling up the heavens with hot air. Sometimes, the final word in the prayer is darkness.

Sometimes, there is no solution just around the corner, and to pretend otherwise just adds more pain to an already impossible situation. Sometimes, there is no dawn just below the horizon, and to pump sunshine is disingenuous at best, and mean at worst. Sometimes, it just hurts.

And my friend, here's what I want you to know. If you're hurting, if you're in the darkness, if you've prayed and prayed and prayed, and it's not getting any better, Psalm 88 gives you permission to name that reality before the very throne of God. Psalm 88 gives you permission to pray, "God, I hate this, and I don't understand what you're doing here at all."

Trust me when I tell you God can handle it. After all, Jesus himself cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" You don't have to pull any punches with God, my friend. You don't have to mince any words. Psalm 88 gives you permission to tell God how it really is.

V

And as I think about us, in our life together here at First Presbyterian Church of Athens, I think that honesty, that candor, is something that the world is longing for from the church.

This is a season of great upheaval and suffering in our world, in our nation, and right here in our own community. Right now, many in our community cannot see a light at the end of the tunnel. Right now, many in our community are not in a place to hear about how the Lord is their shepherd and they shall not want. Right now, many in our community are hurting and angry and frightened.

And Psalm 88 invites us to name that truth before God and one another. Psalm 88 invites us to the kind of faith that is bold enough to raise our voices when there is injustice and suffering, when it seems like not only the powers and rulers of this world but even God's own self has not kept up God's end of the bargain. Psalm 88 invites us to reject the kind of religious triumphalism that promises your best life now while downplaying the abandonment of the garden and the suffering of the cross. Psalm 88 reminds us that even when we find ourselves utterly alone, we are not the first children of God to have ever passed that way.

Darkness is the final word in Psalm 88. Sometimes, it just hurts, and there's nothing that can be done about it except to name it before God. Sometimes, that's just how it is.

So I'm glad Psalm 88 is right there in our bible. And I'm glad that it's not the only word in the bible. Because yes, the final word in Psalm 88 is darkness. But we also know that darkness is not how it always will be. The final word of Psalm 88 is darkness, but because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who himself prays so hard for us that he sweats drops of blood, darkness does not and will never get the final word over us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.