

“The Saddest Psalm”

a message based on
Psalm 88

Followers of Jesus:

Walter Brueggemann divides the psalms into three broad categories. There are psalms that deal with that season in our lives when everything is a-okay. Joy is expressed; exuberance; praise to the LORD. There are also psalms that deal with that season of our lives when anything that is good, everything that is wonderful caves in on us like an avalanche. These psalms express resentment, rage, even hatred. Then there are psalms in which God surprises us with something new out of the mess we find ourselves in. Somehow he works it so that joy comes in the morning, after the night of weeping (Walter Brueggemann, Message of the Psalms).

Which category does Psalm 88 fall under? It is not surprising that someone has called this one “the saddest psalm.” Often in psalms of lament – like Psalm 31 – there is an honest crying out to God relating the details of the trouble.

**Be merciful to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and my body with grief.
My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction,
and my bones grow weak (Ps 31: 9-10).**

But after this crying out, there is always hope, always light peaking through the darkness.

**Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your unfailing love (Ps 31: 16).**

But this is not what we find in Psalm 88; not in the least.

**You have taken my companions and loved ones from me;
the darkness is my closest friend (Ps 88: 18, last verse).**

Have you ever felt that hopeless before? I suspect that Psalm 88 was written by someone with what we today call “mental illness.” Certainly calling *darkness... my closest friend* describes very accurately someone who is clinically depressed. When I say clinically depressed, I’m not talking about those times when we feel sad, those days when we drag our feet and complain of being tired, those times when we admit, “I feel a bit down today.” That is not depression. One of the ways we can tell depression from simply feeling a bit down is that we feel that way not because of things that are going on in our lives, but in spite of how things are going. People feel depressed even when things are going well for them. This is not something we can simply make up our minds about, not something we can say to ourselves, “Well, I have no reason to feel this way, so smarten up!” Sometimes we can control our thoughts. When we are clinically depressed, though, it is beyond our control.

Regardless of whether he had a mental illness, or some other sort of illness, the

writer describes what has happened in his life in very dark terms. One of the words to describe his state of life is: he is feeling isolated. His friends, for whatever reason, have not “been there” for him. I find it interesting in my own life to see this work, and why it is that sometimes God arranges my life so that I am all alone. Perhaps my friends intended it so; perhaps I was in such a state that I was impossible to be with; or perhaps my friends did not intend it so, but they stay away. A lot of times when we go through our times of darkness, people don't know what to say. So, rather than say something wrong, they stay away. This is a really difficult thing for a person who is left alone. It is not a good feeling to be isolated. The isolation is written of again, in Psalm 31.

I am the utter contempt of my neighbors;

**I am a dread to my friends – those who see me on the street
flee from me.**

I am forgotten by them as though I were dead;

I have become like broken pottery (Ps 31: 11-12).

All alone; no support from others. My friends, he complains, flee from me.

Yet, if a mental illness is involved, this isolation is something that is sought; it is wanted; it is just too hard to be with other people, so we'd rather be alone. So it is difficult to know what to do when we know of someone who is going through a tough time, and yet wants to be left alone. This darkness is described in the psalm in various ways.

**Verse 3: For my soul is full of trouble
and my life draws near the grave.**

**Verse 6: You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.**

Verse 12: Are your wonders known in the places of darkness...?

Verse 18: the darkness is my closest friend.

The darkness is oppressive. It is carried around like a heavy back pack. It carries inside the pack *grief* (vs 9) and *terror*; so much terror (verses 15 & 16)! Some people know what it's like to have a panic attacks; deep anxiety that is unexplained, and seems to come upon us for no reason. There is “terror on every side.” No matter which we turn, there's more of it, and still more. It is relentless. It is overwhelming.

... you have overwhelmed me with all your waves (Ps 88: 7).

It is one thing to be left alone by your friends, by your family. It is quite another to be left alone by God. And then the questions come.

**Why, O LORD, do you reject me
and hide your face from me? (Ps 88: 13-14).**

Have we ever had this happen to us? We pray. We cry out to God. We beg him for relief. We look for his help. And all our prayer, all our crying out, it is as though our prayers bounce off the ceiling! They go nowhere. They go unheard. Sometimes we say, “I'd complain, but no one would listen!” It's one thing when people don't listen; it's quite

another when it seems as though God doesn't. That is a terrible, terrible thing!

And yet, the writer of Psalm 88 does something that is quite remarkable. He does not give up, he does not stop, he does not turn away but keeps coming again and again to his God. He keeps praying.

**O LORD, the God who saves me,
day and night I cry out before you.
May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry (Ps 88: 1-2).**

**I call to you, O LORD, every day;
I spread out my hands to you (Ps 88: 9).**

**But I cry to you for help, O LORD;
in the morning my prayer comes before you (Ps 88: 13-14).**

Here is faith that is tested; faith that is persistent; faith that never stops bringing the pain, the anguish, the sorrow, the anxiety, the terror – it all comes pouring out night and day and day and night. God, in this psalm, is encouraging us to bring it all to him, and even when we feel alone in it, even when we feel that God himself has left us, to keep on praying.

You know what? We might be in the darkest place, the most terrible scenes playing across the screen of our minds. We might describe it as “deep gloom,” and in the darkness there is agony; but you know what? For God the darkness is not dark!

**If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night
around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will
shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you (Ps 139: 11-12).**

There's something to tell your little boy or girl when they say they are afraid of the dark; there's something to tell someone who is living in a land of deep gloom.

Jesus said it.

**“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from
this hour’? No, it is for this very reason I came to this hour. Father,
glorify your name!” (John 12: 27-28).**

The heart of Jesus was “troubled”? This was weeks before his death; and on the night before his death, in the garden, in that dark, dark place, Jesus was in agony and was crying out to God, and asking that the Cup be taken from him; “but not my will, but yours be done.”

In no less of a way than the writer of Psalm 88 had a heart that was troubled, in no less than he was in agony, the heart of Jesus was troubled, in agony! Just like Jesus did not ask that his own will be done, so here in this psalm the writer looks to count not on what God can do for him, but on Who God is. In particular please note, “*your love*” and “*your faithfulness*,” God. That is what we hold on to, that his love and faithfulness will carry us through.