

## WHERE IS GOD WHEN WE NEED HIM?<sup>1</sup>

### Psalm 88

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There is, these days, on TV a series of cute and clever commercials sponsored by Staples. In these advertisements, people who are in difficult circumstances or who face daunting challenges have access to an “easy button.” Just push the “easy button” and everything is taken care of. The point is, there is no such “easy button” in life, but for all your business needs there is Staples.

This morning we begin a study of two psalms. There really is no reason to group Psalm 88 and Psalm 109 together, except for the fact that they are both very problematic for our usual religious understandings. These psalms leave us groping for a solution, dangling in the depth of the pit without any obvious sign of rescue. There is no “easy button” for these psalms, and these psalms pointedly and painfully proclaim that there is no “easy button” for life.

Psalm 88 is preoccupied with the *absence* and *silence* of God, whereas Psalm 109 is concerned with *vindictiveness* toward other human beings who have seriously violated the psalmist. These two psalms, when grouped together, embody the main problems of Christian faith: the problem of *trusting a God* who seems not available, and the problem of *caring for a neighbor* who is experienced as an enemy. How do we trust in God when He seems absent and apathetic? How do we love our neighbor when they are, in fact, our enemy? These two psalms are negatively linked to the two greatest commandments.<sup>2</sup> In Psalm 88, it is difficult to love a God who seems to not love us. In Psalm 109, it is difficult to love a neighbor who seems to be beyond love.

I had originally intended to cover these two psalms in a single sermon; but, there is simply too much to be said. Perhaps if I had had an “easy button” . . . Today, we will

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<sup>1</sup>Originally, this sermon was entitled “Two Problem Psalms,” and I had intended to cover both Psalm 88 and Psalm 109. Concerning the issue of the absence and silence of God, see not only Psalm 88, but Psalms 44 and 60 as well.

<sup>2</sup>Mark 12:28-34.

examine Psalm 88, and, Lord willing, next Sunday we will explore Psalm 109.

Psalm 88 reads:

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.  
For my soul is full of trouble  
and my life draws near the grave.<sup>3</sup>  
I am counted among those who go down to the pit;  
I am like those who have no help.  
I am set apart with 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 upon me;  
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. *Selah*  
You have taken from me my closest friends  
and have made me repulsive to them.  
I am confined and cannot escape;  
my eyes are dim with grief.  
I call to you, O LORD, every day;  
I spread out my hands to you.  
Do you show your wonders to the dead?  
Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? *Selah*  
Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,  
or your faithfulness in the place of perdition?<sup>4</sup>  
Are your wonders known in the region of darkness,  
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?  
But I cry to you for help, O LORD;  
in the morning my prayer comes before you.  
Why, O LORD, do you reject me  
and hide your face from me?  
From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death;  
I have suffered 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 my companions and loved ones from me;

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<sup>3</sup>“grave”—Hebrew: *Sheol*.

<sup>4</sup>“place of perdition”—Hebrew: *Abaddon*.

the darkness is my closest friend.  
(NIV translation with modifications.)

Psalm 88 is a desperate and dismal complaint by someone who was probably mortally ill. Death is so near and so real. There is no sadder prayer in the psalms, for in Psalm 88 there are no expressions of trust and there are no expressions of praise. It is a lament that Job could have uttered.

The structure of the psalm is governed primarily by the three instances of the psalmist's crying out or calling to God—vv. 1, 9b, 13. Three different Hebrew words for “cry/call” are used,<sup>5</sup> as if to indicate that the psalmist has exhausted every approach. Every possible approach at every possible moment has been tried, and the result is “darkness.” Each section of the psalm contains a form of the Hebrew root for “darkness”<sup>6</sup>—vv. 6, 12, 18. Darkness pervades both the psalm and the psalmist's experience.

“Psalm 88 is an embarrassment to conventional faith.”<sup>7</sup> It is the cry of a believer who sounds like Job—the cry of one whose life is utterly abysmal, who desperately seeks an answer from God, but who is unable to get God to respond. However, the unanswered plea does not silence the speaker. The failure of God to respond does not lead to atheism or doubt in God or rejection of God. It leads to more intense address to God. This is the essence of the psalmist's faith, *the belief that God is there and that He must be addressed*. He must be addressed even if He never answers. Even if God is the problem, He is also the solution. The psalmist's prayer is proof that he or she is convinced that even life's worst moments somehow have to do with God. The prayer of faith and hope does not always sound pleasant or positive, and it is not afraid to ask honest, but brutal, questions.

The last word in Psalm 88 is darkness—“the darkness is my closest friend.” Nothing works. Nothing is changed. Nothing is resolved. So what is one to do about that? One has two options: either to wait in silence or to speak the prayer again. What one may not do is rush to an easier psalm or give up on God.

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<sup>5</sup>v. 1 – *tsa'aq*; v. 9b – *qara'*; v. 13 – *shw'*.

<sup>6</sup>*khoshek*.

<sup>7</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Augsburg, 1984), 78.

Many years ago I was sitting in the lunchroom of a Baptist seminary. A young man was sitting across the table from me, pouring out his heavy and hurting heart. He was watching his father die slowly and painfully from bone cancer. His words were bitter and brutal, but they were words of one who believed in God. Little did I know that a short time later I would watch my father die of cancer. Little did I know that I would remember the young man's words, and that I would find myself saying them time and time again.

On one occasion in my ministry, I was called upon to assist another minister in performing a funeral. The funeral was for two babies—babies that had died the same night of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). The other minister, who was older and more experienced than me, spoke first. He offered easy answers and soothing solutions. “God needed two more angels,” he said, “so He called your two babies home.” His words made me furious. I was uncertain of what to say, but I was fairly certain of what not to say. What does one say to a mother and father in the midst of grief that is unimaginable, unspeakable, and un-consolable?<sup>8</sup> What does one say to a couple who are angry at God, and yet who feel guilty for feeling so angry? I read the story of Jesus and the little children,<sup>9</sup> and I suggested that Jesus, too, is grieved and angry. Somewhere and in some way God is present in the darkness, although we cannot see Him.

My purpose this morning is not to see how much I can depress you. My purpose is to point out that there is no “easy button” for life. Psalm 88 stands as a mark of realism for biblical faith. It has its pastoral use, because there are situations in which easy, cheap talk that offers answers must be avoided. *Psalm 88 is not to be used frequently; but it is to be used for those experiences when words must be honest, and when we must not say more than should be said.*

What, then, is a psalm like this doing in our Bible? First, at times life is like this, and the psalms intend to speak to all of life, not just the good times. Faith faces life as it is. Second, this psalm is not a psalm of silent agony. It is still speech. If we are people of faith, we must deal with God. It cannot be otherwise. And, God must deal with us. It cannot be otherwise.

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<sup>8</sup>Grammatically, the correct term is “inconsolable.”

<sup>9</sup>Mark 10:13-16.

In his novel *Sophie's Choice*, William Styron depicts the main character, Stingo, returning to New York to bury his two close friends who have committed suicide. As Stingo gets on the bus, he is visibly shaken, without any resource. On the bus, an African American woman seated next to him sees his need and offers her best gift to him. She begins to read the Bible, Psalm 88. The words comfort.<sup>10</sup> They may be the only words that could comfort. Easy words could not have comforted. But this psalm could, because the words assert, against all the facts, that there is indeed a link between the darkness and the Lord of life.

From a Christian perspective, Psalm 88 shows us what the cross of Christ is about: it is about *faithfulness* in times of *abandonment*. Facing the cross, Jesus' soul was full of troubles; He was shunned by those closest to Him; His closest friend was the darkness; and out of the darkness, like the psalmist, He appealed to God and received no answer. In the midst of being forsaken, His cry was still, "My God, my God." Psalm 88 not only provides us words to express the pain of life's worst moments, it also offers testimony to the extremes to which God was willing to go to demonstrate His faithful love for sinful humanity. Just as the psalmist in Psalm 88 suffered, so also God's Son suffered life's worst for us. That is what the cross is finally about; it shows us how much God loves the world. And there is nothing conventional about that kind of love, for it is neither fair nor is it just. "Sheer grace is always a scandal."<sup>11</sup> It is precisely this scandal that forces us to re-evaluate the common view that suffering is a sign of God's punishment or a sign of alienation from God. Because God in Christ claimed the suffering of the psalmist in Psalm 88, we are invited to view suffering in a new way—invited, in fact, to take up a cross and follow Jesus—Jesus who followed in the footsteps of the psalmist.

To read Psalm 88 is not only therapeutic, it is also faithful and instructive. To read Psalm 88 is to remind ourselves that even when we stand in utter darkness, we do not stand alone. We stand with the psalmist of old. We stand with Christ on the cross. To cry into the darkness, "O LORD, the God who saves me," is an act of solidarity with the communion of saints. It is indeed an act of faith and hope that God's will for life is

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<sup>10</sup>William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (Bantam Books, 1979), 614-615.

<sup>11</sup>J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms*, The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. IV (Abingdon, 1996), 1029.

greater than the reality of death. And to pray Psalm 88, is to reaffirm that there is indeed a link between the darkness and the Lord of life.

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