

## Psalms for the Summertime: Psalm 88

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 88

Today's psalm is Psalm 88, it's the third psalm in our series, and as you will hear in a moment, it's a unique psalm, indeed, it is one of the most striking passages in the whole Bible. Before we read it, I want to get us into a frame of mind. If you go to Calvin Seminary, when they teach you to preach, they follow a method called the four-page method of preaching. I won't go into the details of the four pages here, but I will tell you this much about it: one of the questions you always ask when you follow this method is: What is God doing in this text? How is God acting in this text? Where does God act with saving purpose in this Bible passage? It's a good question because it reminds us that the work of salvation always begins and ends with God, and so proclaiming the gospel always means paying attention to what God is doing. Well, let's take that question to Psalm 88. Where is God in this psalm? What is God doing in this psalm?

So, what is God doing in that psalm? Where is God in Psalm 88? Can you see any movement of God in this psalm? It's not easy. This is one of the darkest, rawest places in the Bible.

Last week we studied Psalm 74, and Psalm 74 was pretty grim, pretty direct, but maybe you remember, even Psalm 74 had that middle bit where the mighty acts of God were mentioned. "God you separated day from night. Lord God you parted the waters. God you bring salvation." There's none of that here. This is not so much a psalm of lament as a psalm of despair. In the other lament psalms the psalmist will cry out to God, and complain, but there is always a countervailing voice of hope. In Psalm 74 you hear the memory of God's saving acts. Psalm 13 laments bitterly, but at the end the psalmist turns and says, "But I trust in your unfailing love." Most lament psalms are full of dark clouds, but somewhere a ray of light slants through the clouds and pierces the darkness. There's no ray of light in this storm.

Let's look more closely at the psalm for a moment to see its shape. I would roughly break it up into two halves. In the first half, the psalmist starts with a call for help and a description of his trouble. That's verses 1-5. The first section finishes, not with a plea for God's help, but with accusations. "You did this to me, God! You have put me in the lowest pit, your wrath lies heavy on me, you have taken away my closest friends." So it moves from a cry for help to accusation. That pattern is repeated in the second half of the poem. From the middle of verse 9 to the end of verse 14 the psalmist goes back to describing his situation and pleading for help, but the psalm ends with another set of accusations: "Your wrath has swept over me, your terrors have destroyed me! You have taken from me friend and neighbor and darkness is my closest friend." Again you have the movement from a cry for help to a bitter accusation. The psalm moves from bad to worse.

Where is God in this psalm? Where's the gospel here? Why did the Holy Spirit choose to put this psalm in the Bible? What was God's purpose when he inspired Heman the Ezrahite to write this dark poem?

I've been thinking about that this week and I've become convinced of it that this psalm is God's alternative to death metal. In Psalm 88, Heman the Ezrahite has written something that goes to a death metal kind of place. What do I mean by that? Some of you are wondering, 'What's death metal. It sounds awful!' Well, it is awful. If you know anything about modern music you probably know that there is a kind of rock music called heavy metal. Heavy metal is characterized by loud, crunchy guitars and head-banging music. Death metal is an extreme form of heavy metal. It is loud, chaotic, and disturbing. Here's the Wikipedia description: "Death metal is an extreme subgenre of heavy metal music. It typically employs heavily distorted and low-tuned guitars, played with techniques such as palm muting and tremolo picking; deep growling vocals; aggressive, powerful drumming." If blind rage took musical form, it would sound like death metal. Even the names of the bands are disturbing. Slayer. Cannibal Corpse. Venom. Death metal lyrics are scary. I spent some time reading them this week: they are a mix of rage, murder, hate and gruesome violence. These songs often rage against God. The lyrics are bad enough that they regularly provoke protests from activist groups who are worried about the harm they might do. After reading them, I can see why. I would not want my kid listening to the stuff.

But lots of kids do. Lots of adults listen to the stuff. Death metal is hugely popular. From 1991-2013, Slayer sold 5 million records in the US. So rather than just condemning the stuff which is easy, I want to ask a more important question. Why do people buy these records? Why do thousands of people flock to these concerts? Because they are hurting. Because they are angry. Because they feel abandoned by society. Because they feel the dark weight of despair, and this music, these concerts give them a place to go to express it, to let it fly. To go to a death metal concert is to hear the howl of a 1000 souls who are in pain. It's a mixture of rage and despair. And there are so many people who are attracted to this kind of music, because there are so many people who are angry and in despair.

Death metal may give catharsis to these despairing souls, but I'm not sure it's actually helping them. In Psalm 88 God has given us a better place to go with our anger and despair. Psalm 88 is like a room. Psalm 88 is a room where you can go to shout your rage, shout your pain, shout your accusation. But instead of justifying your rage and glorifying it like death metal does, in Psalm 88 God does something different, he absorbs it, and bends it towards the light.

Older Christian Reformed Church people will remember the novelist Peter DeVries. He was a child of the Christian Reformed Church, but who had a tense relationship with his faith and with God. A lot of that came from his personal struggles. His sister committed suicide. His father fought with depression. And worst of all his 10-year-old daughter, Emily, died of leukemia. A year after his daughter died he wrote a novel called the Blood of the Lamb.

The main character of that novel is a man named Don Wanderhope. Don Wanderhope struggles too, and in the novel, Don's struggles are pretty close to Peter DeVries' struggles. His wife commits suicide. His Father goes insane. And worst of all, the last person he has in his life, his precious 11-year-old daughter, Carol, gets leukemia. Mr. Wanderhope is desperate to hold onto her. He prays and begs and worries. He makes deals with God. He sits beside his daughter's bed and holds her hand as the chemo burns his daughter's insides. Finally, he receives what he thinks is some good news. It looks like the treatments are working! The doctors think Carol will recover!

In his excitement he has a cake made to celebrate the good news. He will take the cake to the hospital to have a party in her room. It's a big square cake with white icing and green and red rosettes of frosting around the rim and in the center his daughter's name carefully scripted. Carol. He gets the cake and he's on his way to the hospital when he decides to stop into St. Catherine's, a local church, and he prays one more time for his daughter. He asks the Lord for healing and for a life together.

But then when he arrives in the hospital something's wrong. The nurses come to meet him with clouded faces. An infection is sweeping through the children's wing and the chemotherapy has weakened Carol's immune system and now the infection was sweeping through Carol. She is suddenly terribly sick. Don Wanderhope gets into the hospital and he sees her lying there and he sees right away that she will not live long. He touches her hand and she smiles. And in a few hours she is gone.

Don stumbles out of the hospital and somehow he remembers the cake. He'd left it in the church where he's been praying. So he stumbles back to the church and finds it there and picks it up and walks out the church front door. And as he does he notices that above the door there is a statue of Jesus there. It's a life-sized stone statue. Christ's arms are outstretched and his head is slightly tilted as he looks down at Don. In a moment of despair and rage, something snaps in Mr. Wanderhope. He takes the cake and balances it in his palm and he throws it. As hard as he can, he throws it at the cross and it hits Jesus right in the face. The icing drips down Christ's face as he hangs there.

Now how do we see that? Is that an act of blasphemy? Is that an act of desecration? I don't think so. It's a Psalm 88 moment. What Psalm 88 does with words, Don Wanderhope did with cake. And when he threw his cake, for a moment St. Catherine's church was a Psalm 88 place. Which is what every church needs to be at times. Because we are a church of the cross of Jesus Christ and the cross is a Psalm 88 sort place. Like this psalm the cross is a place God gives us where he takes our hurt our pain and our sin and he absorbs it, and washes it clean by his blood and returns love and grace in its place.

When I was in college I had a friend who was in a serious car accident with two other girls. She and another friend who was in the car with her came out of the accident fine, but her friend who was driving, let's call her Jane, ended up paralyzed from the waist down. She told a story about how a week after the accident, she

and her uninjured friend, let's call her Mary, went to visit Jane in the hospital. They went there with Mary's Dad who was a minister. It was a tough visit, as you can imagine. Lots of tears and questions. After the visit, as they were leaving the hospital, in her anger, Mary muttered, "I can't believe God let this happen. He sure made a mess of this one." As soon as she said it, her minister father whirled on her and said, "Don't you ever talk that way about God again!"

While I appreciate the father's zeal for God's holiness, and while I appreciate that he too was struggling with his own pain and grief, the minister was absolutely wrong. Psalm 88 shows us that, given the choice between our silence, our pious pretension, or our honest rage, God would rather have our honest rage. It's part of what Jesus came for. It's part of what Jesus died for.

Despair. That's the word the psalmist uses in verse 15 to describe his condition. The Hebrew word used is *apunah*, and it's the only time that word is used in the Bible. A unique word for a unique sort of pain. It makes me wonder if Psalm 88 is the poem of someone who struggles with depression or mental illness. Maybe Heman the Ezrahite struggled with depression or mental illness. "From my youth I have suffered and been close to death! I have borne your terrors and am in despair." Doesn't that sound like the words of someone who started to struggle with depression in his adolescence and has been dealing with it ever since?

Depression is a terrible disease. If you love someone with depression you know how profoundly isolating it is. It's not like regular trouble. Kathryn Greene-McCreight is an episcopal priest who has struggled with severe bipolar depression and says this about it: "Depression is not just sadness or sorrow. Depression is not just negative thinking. Depression is not just being down. It is walking barefoot on broken glass; the weight of one's body grinds the glass in further with every movement. So, [when I am depressed] the weight of my very existence grinds the shards of grief deeper into my soul...every breath, every conscious moment hurts." That too sounds a little bit like what the psalmist is experiencing: "Your wrath lies heavy on me. I am confined and cannot escape. You have taken from me friend and neighbor and now darkness is my closest friend."

According to Johns Hopkins, roughly 10% of adult Americans will be diagnosed with a depressive disorder in their lifetime. One in ten. There are probably 700 people here this morning. So that's 70 of us. 70 people in this room have to fight this terrible disease. In my pastoral experience, that seems about right to me. Is it possible that Psalm 88 is a psalm written by a person in the depths of depression? Is it possible that Psalm 88 is a psalm given by the Holy Spirit for people locked in depression? A sign that God knows the way to that place, knows the terror of that place, a sign that God's strong hand holds you even in that place. Psalm 139: "Even if I made my bed in the depths... even there your right hand will hold me fast."

I wonder if that's what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us in Luke 22:53. When the soldiers come to arrest Jesus in the garden, as they take him away he says, "This is your hour, the hour when darkness reigns." After that for Jesus, all hell breaks loose. I mean that literally; Jesus descends into hell. Soon it will be Jesus in the Psalm 88 place. Soon those last words of Psalm 88 could be prayed by Jesus: "Your wrath has swept over me. You have completely engulfed me. You have taken away friend and neighbor and darkness is my closest friend."

Jesus knows the way to the place of depression. Jesus knows what it feels like to be in that place. Jesus knows how to save you from that place. Jesus can flood even the depths of the grave with everlasting light.

So is Psalm 88 a cheerful place to go? Is it anyone's favorite psalm? Is it a fun read? No. But you should read this psalm once in a while, you should visit this room once in a while, because when you do, you will find Jesus there, ready to make a way through.

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