

Reflections on the Psalms: Session 3

In the Depths; Psalm 88

I know now that we will not be meeting for this session, but that you will be reading this at home. Nevertheless, I hope we can have a sense of learning together as we do that. We may even be able to find ways of discussing together online at some point. Even if not, it is good to know we are all reading and pondering the same Psalm and praying for one another and a suffering world.

In the last session, we looked at Psalm 42 and 43 and reflected on the need to ‘talk’ to ourselves; to remind ourselves that God is God and we should trust and praise him whatever we feel like. We can look back to good times of faith and community worship in the past, and look forward with hope to the future, and therefore find stability and peace in the present, knowing that God is with us *now*.

But reminding ourselves of God’s presence when we are downcast, in the usual ups and downs of life is one thing, but what about the very, very darkest times of suffering, isolation or desolation? We may have a growing sense of shared darkness and suffering at the moment as large number of people in Switzerland, across Europe, and across the world face uncertainty, fear, isolation, illness and death caused by the coronavirus. We are also aware that other forms of suffering - the suffering of refugees, victims of war, famine and climate change – have not disappeared. These people continue to suffer and their suffering will be aggravated by the economic and social instability of the world at the moment, and if the coronavirus takes hold in the midst of war zones and refugee camps, the results will be catastrophic.

Many people in our world face overwhelming and terrifying situations because of war, deprivation or persecution, and others close to us may feel totally overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, sickness or sorrow. What might the Psalms say to us or others in these situations?

Read Psalm 88.

Today we are reflecting on Psalm 88 – probably one of the bleakest passages of the whole Bible. It is so bleak that it might make us feel uncomfortable to read it – indeed there would be something wrong with us if it didn’t. As one commentator says: ‘Psalm 88 is an embarrassment to conventional faith.’ This is not a dignified prayer but an agonised crying out to God. The Psalmist expresses misery and despair, speaking of being ‘shut in’ and unable to escape; sorrows overwhelming him ‘like a flood.’ He is forsaken by friends, but also feels abandoned by God himself: ‘why do you cast me off?’ he cries. He talks of being in ‘regions dark and deep’ and he uses the word ‘darkness’ several times.

In fact, the word ‘darkness’ is the very last word in the Psalm. There is no expression of hope or faith, no easy comfort or cheap grace. The Psalmist refers to God’s ‘steadfast love’, but questions whether that love has any relevance at all in the darkness of suffering and death. We don’t know the reason for his anguish, but he seems to be facing physical, emotional and spiritual suffering. He is in a truly dark place.

YET, he continues to cry out to God, both night and morning, even when there seems to be no answer. If there is any hope to be found, it can only come from God. His prayer is addressed to God, even when God seems to be absent. Darkness may have the last word in the Psalm but he is still crying out to God even in the midst of that darkness.

This Psalm reminds us of the depths of suffering, and the experience of those who feel abandoned by God; those who have no assurance of God’s loving presence with them. We may not have been

in that place ourselves, though we may well feel that we are entering that place at the moment. But will certainly know others who may be in a very bleak place. Sometimes what is necessary is simply to express honestly the pain and questioning and lack of hope we feel, and this Psalm can help us to do that. Even though there is no expression of hope and faith in this Psalm, the very fact of calling on God in the darkness, is an expression of faith itself.

We must allow the agonised cries of deepest suffering to be expressed; whether these are our own cries or the cries of others. It is one thing to 'talk' to ourselves, to 'take ourselves in hand' as it were, in times of downheartedness as we reflected last week, but in the most terrible suffering we 'cannot jolly people along' too quickly to trust, faith and hope. We have to be alongside them in the darkness and let them express their anger, fear, desolation, and even their sense that God has deserted them and there is no hope. It is not 'wrong' to express such thoughts and feelings.

Indeed, the very fact this Psalm is in the Bible, can bring an odd sense of comfort. It can reassure people that expressing darkest fear, doubt and agony is 'OK'. We may not be in this deep pit ourselves, but we will be well aware of others, far and near, who are. The Psalms don't only help us express our own different emotions and attitudes, hopes and fears, but they can also help us imaginatively intercede for others.

I read recently of someone who visited a monastic community and went to one of their services during the night, knowing that they would be praying for people in need. The night can be a time of particular loneliness, fear and suffering when people need the prayers of others. But when the community met for their service all they did for that hour was to chant Psalms! 'When are we going to start praying?' was what the visitor wanted to ask. Then he realised that in their worshipful attentiveness to the ancient words of the Psalms, which express the heights and depths of human experience, the community were indeed praying for the world.

Psalm 88 expresses the agonies of being 'in the depths' and seeing no way out; the Psalmist is simply crying out in desperation to God. We cannot simply 'jolly' people out of these depths, as I said earlier, but perhaps we can stand with them, and intercede for them even in the midst of their darkness and suffering.

Nevertheless, having said all this, we know that the darkness of Psalm 88 doesn't have the last word in our faith. As we read the Psalms, we read them as Christians, and we'll be thinking about that further in our last session on Psalm 22. We know that God himself is in the darkest depths, that there is no place beyond his grace and his love. We know this because Jesus himself has gone through the depths; he has gone through 'the valley of the shadow of death' (to use another phrase from the Psalms), he has gone through the place of desolation and abandonment before us. The cross reminds us that God is with us in suffering and that he can transform it.

In the darkness of the crucifixion, the grace of God is made manifest. This is where we see the love of God poured out to the uttermost for us. As it says in Psalm 139, which we pondered in our first session, 'even the darkness is not darkness to you.' Even in the overwhelming darkness like that expressed in Psalm 88, God IS present, and going through such agonising times of darkness may even draw us closer to him. Many spiritual writers taken the image of darkness to speak of God's secret work of grace within us. Through an experience of a 'dark night of the soul'; through suffering, sickness, isolation, bewilderment, and uncertainty, God may sometimes be at work in us in a deeper way than in times of joy and light. We may have to go through the 'dark night' on the way to the morning, and God's love is with us even in the blackest part of the night.

This Psalm may end with the word 'darkness'; but looking to Jesus, crucified and risen can give us the assurance that darkness does NOT in the end have the last word, for us or for our world.

Session 3: In the Depths

Suggestions for Reflection on Psalms 88

Meditating on Psalm 88: *Lectio Divina*

1. Be still and relax in God's presence.
2. **Reading:** Read the passage through slowly, noticing any words or phrases which strike you.
3. **Meditation:** Ponder these words and phrases, letting them sink deep into your heart and mind. Be aware of the feelings or thoughts which emerge...of thankfulness, peace, questioning, disbelief, confusion or whatever...
4. **Prayer:** Turn these thoughts and feelings on these phrases of scripture into a prayer to God; simply tell him how you are feeling and what you are thinking. If your mind wanders far away - thinking about other things, offer these fragmented thoughts to God too, then gently bring your mind and heart back into focus by repeating one of the phrases in the passage.
5. **Contemplation:** After you have responded to the passage in prayer, simply be still again in God's loving presence. This is the heart of all prayer.

Further Questions to Ponder

1. Have you ever felt like you have been 'in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep (v6), in a place where God's 'steadfast love' and 'saving help' (v 11-12) seem totally absent (v14)? When there seems no hope, do you continue to express that hopelessness to God as the Psalmist does, or do you just give up on God altogether?
2. Is there some strange comfort in the fact that these bleak words of desperation and suffering are found in the Bible? Can you use this Psalm to help you intercede for those living in desperate situations in our world, those suffering from the coronavirus, and all those you know who are isolated or overwhelmed physically or spiritually?
3. 'Are your wonders known in the darkness?' (v 12) How do you respond to the suggestion that God might sometimes be able to touch us more deeply through darkness; and that the experience of God's seeming absence can in fact sharpen our desire for him and draw us closer to him?

God does not send suffering, but he may use it:

'God uses suffering to purge sin from our lives, strengthen our commitment to him, force us to depend on grace, bind us together with other believers, produce discernment, foster sensitivity, discipline our minds, spend our time wisely, stretch our hope, cause us to know Christ better, make us long for the truth...teach us to give thanks in times of sorrow, increase faith, and strengthen character.'

(Joni Eareckson Tada, who was paralysed from the waist down when she was 17 and has lived with paralysis ever since.