

## Psalm 88 – God and my despair

A significant number of the Psalms in the book of Psalms are songs of lament.

Both individual and communal laments.

To lament is to express deep grief and sorrow in the face of living in a sin broken world.

We cannot do justice to the Psalms unless we engage with Psalms of lament.

Next week we will lament at the grief of our own sin in Psalm 130.

But this week we will just lament in Psalm 88.

We're told that this Psalm was written by Heman, a descendant of Korah from the Levites

And a number of the Psalms were written by the Sons or descendants of Korah

And during David's reign, Heman along with other Sons of Korah like Asaph and Ethan

Became important song leaders in Tabernacle worship

Mahaloth Leannoth most likely is a stringed instrument

The terms maskil and selah are most likely musical terms

Before we begin, let's pray.

Most Hollywood movies have a three-act structure

In Act 1 - the set-up

Act 2 - the confrontation or conflict

and Act 3 the resolution.

We find these movies satisfying

Because there is often a feel good, happy ending.

Take for example the Lion King

Spoiler alert but hey you've had 30 years to watch it

Act 1 – The Set -up

Simba's father the King is killed by His uncle but is manipulated to think that he killed his father

Act 2 – The confrontation

Simba exiles himself and for years he goes to live his Akuna Matata life until he is told that the lion kingdom is in a terrible state under his uncle

Act 3 – The resolution

Simba confront his uncle and his inner demons to take his rightful place as the new king

Satisfying, that's the ending we want.

What happens when the story finishes in Act 2?

Take for example The Empire Strikes Back in the Star Wars anthology

By the end of the movie

The good guys are bruised, battered, captured and beating a retreat

And the arch villain Darth Vader turns out to be the hero's father

The movie finishes in Act 2

It is the darkest of the Star Wars movies

And for many die-hard Star Wars fans it is their favourite.

Because often that's what real life is like

It's dark, gritty and not feel good

And sometimes you are left with more questions than answers

Psalm 88 is just like this.

Psalm 88 is a Psalm that finishes in Act 2.

It's the darkest of all the Psalms

The psalms of lament usually finish with a resolution

A renewed trust in God

A commitment to keep praising God.

But listen to how Psalm 88 finishes in verse 18  
As the Psalmist says of God

<sup>18</sup>You have distanced loved one and neighbour from me;  
darkness is my only friend.

Why are we studying it?  
What value is this Psalm to us then?  
Because Psalm 88 often reflects real life.

Walter Brueggeman, one of the commentators on the book of Psalms says this

Psalm 88 stands as a mark of realism of biblical faith. It has a pastoral use, because there are situations in which easy, cheap talk of resolution must be avoided.

As we look at Psalm 88 today we'll be looking at three things:

**God invites our honest cries**  
**God is sovereign in our suffering**  
**God is present in the darkness**

**Firstly God invites our honest cries**

Verse 1

<sup>1</sup>Lord, God of my salvation,  
I cry out before you day and night.  
<sup>2</sup>May my prayer reach your presence;  
listen to my cry.

A bit further in verse 9

<sup>9</sup>My eyes are worn out from crying.  
Lord, I cry out to you all day long;  
I spread out my hands to you.

Verse 13

<sup>13</sup>But I call to you for help, Lord;  
in the morning my prayer meets you.

It's clear right throughout this song  
That the author of this Psalm is suffering.  
But in spite of the despair and distress he is experiencing  
He continues to engage with God with desperate cries.

What exactly is the Psalmist suffering?

We're not told but here are some of the effects:

In verse 8 and 18 he is isolated  
As friends, neighbours and loved ones are distanced from him  
They find him repulsive we're told in verse 8

He has been suffering for a long time since his youth (verse 15)  
And although he mentions God's wrath or anger twice in the passage  
There is no indication that he is suffering because he has done something wrong

How is the Psalmist feeling?  
He feels like the living dead

### Verse 3

<sup>3</sup> For I have had enough troubles,  
and my life is near Sheol.

In the Old Testament, Sheol is regarded as the place of the dead

### Verse 4

<sup>4</sup> I am counted among those going down to the Pit.  
I am like a man without strength,  
<sup>5</sup> abandoned among the dead.  
I am like the slain lying in the grave,  
whom you no longer remember,  
and who are cut off from your care.

Death was and still is a terrible state  
Death is to be cut off from every good gift of God  
And for the Psalmist, he feels like his life is not much better than death warmed up  
He feels completely overwhelmed by grief and despair  
That he feels as good as dead.

Can you relate to this?  
Can you think of a time in your life when you felt as good as dead?  
As though every ounce of oxygen had been sucked out of you?

Here is a list I compiled over the last few days of when you might feel like that.  
These are things I have either personally encountered in my ministry as a pastor  
Or have happened to me or people close to me

The death of a spouse, a child, a sibling or a parent, sometimes very unexpected  
The struggle with various forms of addiction – gambling, alcohol, drug, porn, exercise, food  
The struggle of childlessness  
The grief of miscarriage and stillbirth  
The shock of an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy  
The shame of an abortion  
The unfulfilled desire to get married  
Crippling loneliness as a single or married person  
Lifetime savings decimated by a global financial crisis  
The embarrassment of a failed engagement  
The ongoing impact of divorce  
The daily dread of dealing with a controlling and abusive spouse  
The bewilderment of a moral failure of a pastor  
The disappointment of a business failure  
The uncertainty of years of unresolved visa status  
The toll of chronic mental and physical health problems  
The ongoing weariness of degenerative disease  
The guilt of unemployment  
The helplessness when a child pushes you away  
The agony of chronic pain  
The fatigue of being a carer of others with illness or disability  
The confusion of being scammed  
The broken trust from sexual immorality inside and outside marriage  
The fog of burnout  
The grief of being persecuted for your faith  
The sadness of seeing a loved one walk away from God

The complexity of an eating disorder  
The hurt of being cut off from your family  
The scars of childhood trauma  
The heartache of unresolved conflict and broken relationship  
The burden of financial debt  
The pain of racism or being bullied  
The shock of being diagnosed with a terminal disease  
The devastation of a bushfire or flood  
A global pandemic and everything that comes with it

So much suffering  
So much grief  
I'm sorry if I left your suffering off this list – it was not intentional.

But can you relate to the Psalmist when he says, “my eyes are worn out from crying”  
“I have had enough troubles and my life is near Sheol”

I did want to share that list for two reasons.

The first one is that everyone suffers, everyone grieves  
And if you haven't yet, just wait because you will  
And when you suffer, you will think that you are completely alone,  
Completely unique and that no one could understand how you feel  
That's what I have thought each time I have suffered one or more of those experiences on the list

Peter Adam,  
Respected Melbourne pastor, preacher and my former Bible College principal  
Said this in an interview about living for many years with his depression

“The unmitigated gloom of Psalm 88 meant that someone else had these feelings too, so I was not alone and God recognised that people felt like that sometimes. That was wonderful—I used to say the Psalm again and again.”

When you feel alone in your grief  
Read Psalm 88 again and again  
Because there was someone who felt like you do

The second reason I shared the list was to ask you what you do with your grief and the grief of others?  
Do you cry out to God like the Psalmist?  
Because God recognises your suffering and your grief  
He welcomes your honest cries  
That is why Psalms of lament are in the bible?  
How Long Lord?  
Why Lord?  
Sometimes life sucks  
And God wants you to cry out to him

Often we will do everything else BUT pray  
Self-reliance  
Distraction  
Self medication  
Blame  
Avoidance  
Pretending  
Churches every Sunday are full of people pretending

How are you going?  
I'm fine  
But we don't need to pretend do we?

I once attended the funeral of a young person who died unexpectedly  
It was quite a shock  
The young person was a follower of Christ  
And at the funeral from the very outset  
The pastor and the family spoke of victory, of heaven, of celebration  
Almost as if they were rushing their loved one to heaven  
It felt like they were forcing Act 3 to happen  
Because they didn't want to sit in the grief of Act 2

In John chapter 11  
When Jesus is ministering to Mary upon the death of her brother Lazarus  
Jesus saw her weeping and those that came with her weeping  
What did Jesus do?  
He wept.  
Deeply moved in spirit and troubled, it says in the text.  
Jesus wept.  
He grieved with those who grieve

Here's what I want you to do.  
When someone asks you after church "how are you going?"  
If life sucks  
I give you permission to say this:  
"To be honest, I feel like the living dead"

Now if you are the person they're talking to  
Then here's what I want you to say  
"Would you like to share more?"  
And when they share  
I want you to listen, really listen  
Sometimes there will be long gaps of silence and you just need to sit in that silence  
And when you think you've listened enough  
I want you to listen some more  
I don't want you to interrupt them with this  
"I know exactly how you feel"  
Because you don't  
And after they've finished sharing  
I want you to ask this  
"Have you had an opportunity to talk about this with God?"  
Chances are they haven't for many reasons  
And then say this: "Can I pray about this right now?"  
And 99% of the time they will say yes  
And then pray something like this  
Dear Father God,  
Things sound so hard right now for my friend  
So unrelentless, so grieving  
I'm not sure exactly what to pray but I know you know and love my friend  
Better than anyone else.  
And I want to cry out to you for help.  
Please help her.

It's okay to bring a grieving person to one of the pastors  
But you know what I just shared with you  
Is exactly what I would do as a pastor  
And you can do that too.

### **God invites our honest cries**

#### **Here's the second point - God is sovereign in our suffering**

Psalm 88 is a prayer of deep faith  
Because the Psalmist has a deep view of God  
He is wrestling with God's character  
Look at verse 1 and see what he calls God

<sup>1</sup> Lord, God of my salvation,

In the midst of his grief  
The Psalmist is still clinging to the promise of a God who delivers  
He is the God who saves His people and keeps His promises to them  
That's why he can still cry out to God with a glimmer of hope

But at the same time,  
The Psalmist is also grappling with God's part in his suffering  
Verse 6

<sup>6</sup> You have put me in the lowest part of the Pit,  
in the darkest places, in the depths.

<sup>7</sup> Your wrath weighs heavily on me;  
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. *Selah*

<sup>8</sup> You have distanced my friends from me;  
you have made me repulsive to them.  
I am shut in and cannot go out.

In some way, he holds God responsible for his suffering.  
And he brings his accusation before God.  
Verse 14

<sup>14</sup> Lord, why do you reject me?  
Why do you hide your face from me?  
Verse 16

<sup>16</sup> Your wrath sweeps over me;  
your terrors destroy me.  
Verse 18

<sup>18</sup> You have distanced loved one and neighbour from me;

The Psalmist is wrestling with God's sovereignty and His character  
If God is in control of everything  
And is God is good  
But why then does He allow me to suffer like this?  
The Psalmist's experience runs right up against what he knows of God  
"I've been trying to live a godly life"  
"In communion with God"  
"Then why does God bring this kind of suffering upon me"  
"Why does he treat me as though I was the wicked?"

In the book of Job, we see this same struggle  
Job is described as a man of integrity who feared God and turned away from evil  
And yet God allows Satan to bring terrible suffering into his life

He loses his children  
He loses his livelihood and possessions  
He is inflicted with a terrible disease  
And his wife and three friends give him terrible advice

Throughout the book  
Job wrestles with his friends and with God  
About why God has brought such suffering into his life  
And by the end of the book  
God actually says that Job spoke the truth about God  
Even though he didn't get everything right about God  
Job actually needed to learn an important lesson

God is God  
And we are not

Job 42:1

Then Job replied to the Lord:

<sup>2</sup> I know that you can do anything  
and no plan of yours can be thwarted.

<sup>3</sup> You asked, "Who is this who conceals my counsel with ignorance?"  
Surely I spoke about things I did not understand,  
things too wondrous for me to know.

<sup>4</sup> You said, "Listen now, and I will speak.  
When I question you, you will inform me."

<sup>5</sup> I had heard reports about you,  
but now my eyes have seen you.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore, I reject my words and am sorry for them;  
I am dust and ashes

God is sovereign in our suffering  
He has good plans and purposes  
And often we don't understand them at the time  
And sometimes we will only later

When Joseph went through episode after episode of suffering  
God had a purpose to make him ruler over Egypt in order to save nations from famine

When God raised Babylon and Assyria to inflict suffering on His own people  
God had a purpose to punish and refine his people

And when God poured out his wrath on His suffering servant son Jesus on the cross  
God had a purpose to rescue a world full of rebels.

As you keep wrestling with God in your grief and your suffering  
Will you like the Psalmist and like Job,  
Will you be open to having your view of God changed and deepened?

Do you believe that when you suffer through Act 2  
God could make your view of him deeper and richer and better than if you hadn't gone through it?  
Some of our brothers and sisters here in this church who have suffered greatly  
Can say "Amen" to that.  
God is sovereign, even in our suffering,  
These griefs are not outside His control  
And he can use them for your good

To make you more and more like His Son Jesus.

Author and Bible Teacher, Nancy Guthrie  
Had three children  
Two of her children, Hope and Gabriel both died at 6 months old  
After being born with a rare genetic condition  
God has used her and her husband David's suffering to help many people  
In her book, "Holding on to Hope", Nancy writes

*Early on in my journey I said to God, "Okay, if I have to go through this, then give me everything. Teach me everything you want to teach me through this. Don't let this incredible pain be wasted in my life!" I know God has a purpose for allowing this pain into my life and that it is for my ultimate good. So I can actually embrace my pain. Would you believe I can thank God for this bitter but rich experience? I can, because I know God is good—that he allows good and bad into our lives and that we can trust him with both.*

The sovereign God can use Act 2 in your life too.

### **Finally God is present in the darkness**

In verse 10, the Psalmist says

<sup>10</sup> Do you work wonders for the dead?  
Do departed spirits rise up to praise you?  
<sup>11</sup> Will your faithful love be declared in the grave,  
your faithfulness in Abaddon?

Abaddon, like Sheol is a term for the place of the dead

<sup>12</sup> Will your wonders be known in the darkness  
or your righteousness in the land of oblivion?

Sometimes when you suffer you are left with more questions than answers  
And that is how the Psalmist finishes?  
God are you going to be faithful?  
Are you going to keep your promises to your people?  
Will my death be the final word?  
Are you going to do something?  
Or am I going to remain alone in my lonely grief until I die?

Where is God in the darkness?

On the worst and best day in history  
Darkness fell on a lonely cross in Jerusalem  
The Son of God who was also God the Son  
Was nailed to that cross  
Abandoned and betrayed  
In excruciating pain  
He cried an honest cry to His Father God  
A lament from the Psalms

"My God, my God why have you abandoned me"

In the darkness - Jesus carried all our sin upon himself  
In the darkness – Jesus suffered God's wrath and broke the power of sin  
In the darkness – Jesus' death crushed our death  
And his final words on the cross before he died,



Jesus said, "It is finished".  
The power of Sin is finished  
The curse of Death is finished  
Suffering and Grief are not the last word  
Because darkness gives way to the light  
The death and resurrection of Jesus is Act 3 – God's final resolution

So that when you face the grief and suffering of Act 2  
When you sit in the darkness  
You can know that today is not always  
You can know that you are not alone  
You can know that God is present with you  
And one day because of the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus  
He will bring you into the glorious light of His throne in heaven  
Where he will wipe away every tear from your eye  
And where there will be no more mourning or crying or pain

The clip that I showed you at the start  
Was of a young woman called Jane Marcewski  
Performing under the stage name Nightbirde,  
Last year in June, on America's Got Talent she performed a song she wrote called "It's OK"  
She received a Golden Buzzer from Simon Cowell meaning she went straight to the finals  
This came after 4 years of battling with breast cancer  
And twice being declared cancer free  
And the breakdown of her marriage in 2020.  
After all she went through there was no Hollywood ending  
Because by August, Jane was too unwell to perform in the semi-finals  
And then in February this year,  
Jane Nightbirde Marcewski died at the age of 31.

It turns out that Jane was a follower of Jesus  
From a family of followers of Jesus  
One of her final blog posts was entitled  
"God is on the bathroom floor"

Jane writes:

*I spent three months propped against the wall. On nights that I could not sleep, I laid in the tub like an insect, staring at my reflection in the shower knob. I vomited until I was hollow. I rolled up under my robe on the tile. The bathroom floor became my place to hide, where I could scream and be ugly; where I could sob and spit and eventually doze off, happy to be asleep, even with my head on the toilet.*

*Call me cursed, call me lost, call me scorned. But that's not all. Call me chosen, blessed, sought-after. Call me the one who God whispers his secrets to. I am the one whose belly is filled with loaves of mercy that were hidden for me.*

*Even on days when I'm not so sick, sometimes I go lay on the mat in the afternoon light to listen for Him. I know it sounds crazy, and I can't really explain it, but God is in there—even now. I have heard it said that some people can't see God because they won't look low enough, and it's true.  
If you can't see him, look lower. God is on the bathroom floor.*

At her memorial service in March this year  
Jane's sister Katelyn performed an original song she wrote for her sister  
Here are some of the lyrics

*Each morning we're given a chance to say  
"Thank you Jesus" for giving this day  
Life is a gift that we're thankful for  
We'll take miracles as they come  
Stand in the darkness with hope and joy in the mourning that comes  
Some day our tears will all pass away  
Pain will be something that's lost  
The strength that we find to walk each day  
Is found at the foot of the cross  
Sing Hallelujah, Hallelujah to the King  
He has given us every good thing*

*Let's pray*