

## PSALM 88

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence,  
<sup>2</sup> let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.

<sup>3</sup> For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.

<sup>4</sup> I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;

I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead,  
like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more,  
for they are cut off from your hand.

<sup>6</sup> You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep.  
Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves.

You have caused my companions to shun me;  
you have made me a thing of horror to them.

I am shut in so that I cannot escape; <sup>9</sup> my eye grows dim through sorrow.

Every day I call on you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.

<sup>10</sup> Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you?

<sup>11</sup> Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon?

<sup>13</sup> But I, O LORD, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.

<sup>14</sup> O LORD, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?

<sup>15</sup> Wretched and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

<sup>16</sup> Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me.

<sup>17</sup> They surround me like a flood all day long; from all sides they close in on me.

<sup>18</sup> You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me;  
my companions are in darkness.

Why is this psalm in the psalter? It begins and ends in anger and despair with no relief anywhere. Many commentators through the ages have asked this very question, seeking to understand. And not only does the psalm express anger and despair with no relief, but it is composed as a prayer to God. The psalmist blames God for their troubles. God is the cause because God is in charge. There's no sense of "this is happening to me because I deserve it or I've done something wrong." No. God is in the wrong. There's no sense of "this may be bad now, but God will come to my help and save me." No. Trouble has been with them a long time and they'll die in trouble. God is the cause of "terror" for the psalmist and God's "wrath" is the only motivation the psalmist can imagine for their suffering.

OK. So do we give up trying to understand why this psalm is in the psalter? Do we remain in our perplexity as to why the psalmist would have taken the time and made the effort to compose a prayer to God that is so hopeless and angry? Or is this psalm also an invitation to all those who are passing through a time of anger or despair themselves?

Too often we turn to prayer when we're ready for it. We settle ourselves and try to find the right language to address God in our thoughts, respectfully and all. What the psalms teach us, however, and this psalm in particular, is that prayer has to be something on our lips, in our minds and in our hearts at all times. To be able to pray not only when we are feeling joyful and grateful, and not only when we need something from God for ourselves or are praying for some situation or person we care about, but also when we are down and out angry, deeply sad, and hopelessly despairing. Psalm 88 gives us wonderful permission and encouragement to pray our anger and despair.

But will it make a difference? It may be sweet relief to rage, yell and cry out our anger and despair. But will it make a difference? When Jesus engages people who are mentally distressed, their experience of healing is described as an exorcism of some demon(s). Now this may not be familiar language for how we may express mental healing in our world today, but I think the language of exorcising our demons is very helpful when it comes to the distress, the anger and the despair we often carry in difficult times of life. Could a psalm like this one, prayed through tears, cries and angry words, help in the exorcising of our demons? May it help bring to the surface what is deep inside so that it can evacuate our spirit more easily? May we find some relief if not peace by repeating this psalm as a personal prayer? And may a whole other face of God appear to us in time – a God of steadfast love who will stick it out with us even when we blame God because we expect God to rescue us like some almighty controller of the universe?

I must say, Psalm 88 is becoming a favourite psalm of mine. I'm grateful it is included in the psalter. It is a gift that I've bookmarked in my bible, ready to turn to it as life may throw some rough curves my way. What about you?

**PRAYER:** God of my right, I look around at the world and, sometimes, I look at my own life, and I ask: where is the justice? Where is the fairness? Where are you? Sometimes you feel really close to me, O God, but other times you feel very far away. I know I should grow up in my faith. I know I should not expect you to be some puppet master in the sky intervening when terrible things happen and when sickness and other kinds of terror interfere with our best laid plans. But how, then, are you a God of righteousness and justice? How then may you help in times of trouble? How then will you rescue those who seek you? May your love flow into me as healing energy, as the energy of fresh courage, resilience and transformation. Whether I live tomorrow or die, may your name be on my lips and in my heart... Amen.