

Darkness Is My One Companion Left

Psalm 88, Matthew 26:38
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Dr. Mike Brownstein, a medical researcher for many years with the National Institute of Mental Health, is preparing a talk for the public on the subject of depression. He told me he was looking for a scripture reference to depression and had in mind a quotation from the book of Job. I pointed him to Psalm 88, and Mike decided to use one verse from the King James Version as the title for his talk: "Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps."

I want to read Psalm 88 for you from the original Jerusalem Bible translation because of its poetic diction and its final line. I have to warn you: it's heavy stuff. There are many other laments in the Bible, like Psalm 130 which Martin read earlier—"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord"—but they all turn at some point to praise. Psalm 88 is the only one which never sounds the note of praise or hope. It is a prayer to the God of my salvation, but it is a prayer that brings deep darkness into God's presence. It is the prayer of a man who has fallen into despair.

88:1 Yahweh my God, I call for help all day, I weep to you all night;
88:2 may my prayer reach you hear my cries for help;
88:3 for my soul is all troubled, my life is on the brink of Sheol;
88:4 I am numbered among those who go down to the Pit, a man bereft of strength:
88:5 a man alone, down among the dead, among the slaughtered in their graves, among those you have forgotten, those deprived of your protecting hand.
88:6 You have plunged me to the bottom of the Pit, to its darkest, deepest place,
88:7 weighted down by your anger, drowned beneath your waves. (pause)
88:8 You have turned my friends against me and made me repulsive to them; in prison and unable to escape, my eyes are worn out with suffering.
88:9 Yahweh, I invoke you all day, I stretch out my hands to you:
88:10 are your marvels meant for the dead, can ghosts rise up to praise you?
88:11 Who talks of your love in the grave, of your faithfulness in the place of perdition?
88:12 Do they hear about your marvels in the dark, about your righteousness in the land of oblivion?
(pause)
88:13 But I am here, calling for your help, praying to you every morning:
88:14 why do you reject me? Why do you hide your face from me?
88:15 Wretched, slowly dying since my youth, I bore your terrors - now I am exhausted;
88:16 your anger overwhelmed me, you destroyed me with your terrors
88:17 which, like a flood, were round me, all day long, all together closing in on me.
88:18 You have turned my friends and neighbours against me, now darkness is my one companion left.

This psalm is not included in the Common Lectionary, and for good reason. We don't want church to be a downer. We want to offer hope rather than to legitimate despair. Even if many people come to church with the feeling that deep sinkholes are opening up in their own back yards, we would rather stretch a thin layer of scripture over the top of the sinkhole and pretend it does not exist.

But the question I want to raise this morning makes me wonder if God and the rabbis weren't smarter than the lectionary committee. The question is this: Why would a dark prayer like Psalm 88 be included in the Bible? Is this cry inspired by the Holy Spirit?

Jewish tradition included this poem or song as part of worship in the days after the Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The rabbis officially voted it into the canon in the days after the last Temple had been destroyed by the Romans. Unlike those who think the life of faith is a life of victory, they had experienced defeat. They knew from the experience of Moses and Elijah and Jeremiah and Job that it is all right to argue with God. God doesn't mind when we show our dark side. God doesn't punish us when we say we are ready to give up and would rather die. All four of those heroes of the faith did that. Jeremiah says to Yahweh, "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? You are to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails" (15:18).

One of the great gifts of the Jews to the world was honesty toward God. This prayer shows us that faithful prayer does not have to be "positive." If the pastor prayed this way in public it would be upsetting, but the truth is that if you pray this way to God it opens communication between you and God. Denying that you are hurting shuts it down, but crying out in despair allows us to connect with God.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that "Psalm 88 is an embarrassment to conventional faith." Conventional faith is the faith of Job's friends, who kept telling him that he must have done something wrong. God must be punishing you. Conventional faith today would probably say to Job, "Don't be sad! So you've lost your family and your home and your wealth and your health. Count your blessings! Smile and the world smiles with you! Thank God for your trials. Put on a happy face or just stay home. We are a positive church here, and we have no room for whiners."

But Brueggemann also says that "Psalm 88 shows us what the cross is about: *faithfulness* in scenes of complete *abandonment*." The cross shows us the faith of Jesus who was overwhelmed with sorrow but said "Not my will but yours be done." The cross shows us the faith of Jesus who cried out, quoting Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and yet was faithful unto death. You wonder how anybody could come into a church with a cross—a church that worships Jesus as the perfect man and God's Son—and still believe that God wants us to avoid sorrow, that somehow those who are sad are falling short of God's plan for their lives.

Most of you know that my mother suffered from depression even though she was a person of great faith and a missionary to Japan. She spent such a long time in deep darkness that she had to be brought back to the States and placed in a hospital for shock treatment. This was in a time when mental illness had considerably more stigma than it does now—and it still carries a stigma. My mother herself no doubt suffered all the more because she treated her illness as a moral failure for much of her life. It was not a moral failure or a spiritual failure; it was a combination of a response to real tragedies and a disease of the brain.

There have been many great leaders who suffered from severe bouts of depression, including famously Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill, who called it "the black dog." There have been many saints and poets who have spent long stretches of their lives in the Pit, making their bed in Sheol. The

most popular preacher in England in the 19th century was Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a Baptist evangelist who had one of the first megachurches and packed them in in London with his fiery sermons. But Spurgeon was also subject to depression. He published a verse-by-verse commentary on the Psalms, and it's revealing to read what he says about Psalm 88:

He was more dead than alive. Some of us can enter this experience. Many times we have traveled this valley of death's shade and lived in it for months. To die and to be with Christ will be a gala day's enjoyment when compared with our misery during those times when something worse than physical death casts its dreadful shadow over us. Death would be a welcomed relief for those whose depression makes their existence a living death.

In another place he says

The mind can descend far lower than the body, for there are bottomless pits. The flesh can bear only so many wounds, but the soul can bleed in a thousand ways and die over and over again each hour.

More people are disabled by depression than by any other ailment in America. Millions of people are so crippled by it that they cannot function. I think most of us have just the barest idea of what it is like, because all of us at some point in our lives have suffered grievous wounds and broken hearts. But imagine if that went on forever. Imagine if that pain that you felt at its most intense was the feeling you woke up with and the feeling that kept you awake at night. Can you imagine how unbearable that would be? I am not a depressive person, maybe because I grew up under the cloud of my mother's depression and developed defense mechanisms. But for the same reason I married a depressive person. And some of you in this room suffer from depression, or have. And you know that unless you've been there you can't understand it. The person who says "Pull yourself together" or "Try to be positive" doesn't have a clue. There are days when you can't get yourself out of bed and it's not a moral failure; it's a disease as surely as if you were kept in bed by polio or encephalitis.

The national poet of Australia is a man named Les Murray, who grew up working-class in a rural area and achieved great acclaim until late middle age when he was suddenly paralyzed by depression. Having moved back to his hometown, he gave a reading at his high school and a classmate reminded him of the nicknames they used to call him. That night he emotionally fell off a cliff and went downhill from there. Of course it had its roots in childhood. Of course there was a genetic component and ungrieved losses and current stressors, but it happened very quickly. Listen to how Murray describes it in his memoir, *Killing the Black Dog* [Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2011]:

Every day [I had] a season of helpless, bottomless misery in which I would lie curled in a foetal position on the sofa with tears leaking from my eyes, my brain boiling with a confusion of stuff not worth calling thought or imagery: it was more like shredded mental kelp marinated in pure pain.

Murray describes what he calls "the 4 a.m. show":

the predawn darkness in which you wake and lie sleepless till dawn, your troubles and terrors ripping into you with a gusto allowed them by fatigue and the disappearance of proportion.

That's the kind of darkness in which the psalmist is writing in Psalm 88.

There's a scene in *Sophie's Choice*, the novel by William Styron, in which Stingo, the young Southern writer who is a stand-in for Styron in the novel, is all upset by what is going on in Brooklyn and what he is learning about Nazi prison camps and the slaveholding of his own ancestors. He is taking a train and winds up sitting next to an African-American woman reading her Bible. She asks what he would like to

hear, and he asks for Psalm 88. Later she reads the Sermon on the Mount, but he asks her to go back to the old Hebrew woes, and she turns to the book of Job.

Why does it help to hear the sad songs? Les Murray says that when you are depressed and in despair “You feel *beneath* help, beneath the reach even of Godhead.” The African-American poet Kevin Young wrote a poem called “Last Ditch Blues” [*Dear Darkness*, Knopf, 2008]. Let me quote just a few lines: “Even Death/don’t want me....Even God...The paperboy only/sold me bad news./And wet at that./The obit page said: *Not today*.” Your emotional sense is, as the psalmist says, that “darkness is my one companion left.” But the truth is that you do not stand alone. The psalmist stands with you. The Bible stands with you. Someone understands, and the fact that it is in the Bible reminds you that God is not oblivious to your suffering.

That is why it is profoundly comforting to hear Jesus say in the garden of Gethsemane on the night when he was betrayed, “I am overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” Just think about that. Even Jesus was overwhelmed. Even Jesus could say with the Allman Brothers, “Sometimes I feel...like I’m tied to a whipping post...Good Lord, I feel like I’m dyin’.” Just to underline Jesus’ words, I want to read them from several translations. The Good News: “The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me.” The Holman Christian Standard: “My soul is swallowed up in sorrow—to the point of death.” The Message: “This sorrow is crushing my life out.” God’s Word: “My anguish is so great that I feel as if I’m dying.”

What does this mean to us? It means, first of all, that deep sorrow is part of the human experience. There’s nothing wrong with being sad. It means, second, that we can always go to God with our sorrow. Jesus models that for us. But third—and maybe most important—it means that Jesus understands what we are going through when we are crushed by depression or emotional pain. The old hymn says

*Jesus knows all about our struggles;
He will guide 'til the day is done:
There's not a Friend like the lowly Jesus:
No, not one! no, not one!*

The spiritual says “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen; nobody knows but Jesus.”

Psalm 88 does not appear in the Common Lectionary, but one of the lectionary texts for today is Hebrews 4:15—“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” We have Jesus as our high priest, the human one who was made like us in every respect so that he could understand us and intercede for us. We have one who knows what it is to feel abandoned by God. We have one who knows what it is to feel overwhelmed. He will not condemn us as so many do. He will not think that it is our fault, because he has been through it. So the author of Hebrews goes on, “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”