

Psalm 88

The Message

88 ¹⁻⁹ GOD, you're my last chance of the day.

I spend the night on my knees before you.

Put me on your salvation agenda;

take notes on the trouble I'm in.

I've had my fill of trouble;

I'm camped on the edge of hell.

I'm written off as a lost cause,

one more statistic, a hopeless case.

Abandoned as already dead,

one more body in a stack of corpses,

And not so much as a gravestone—

I'm a black hole in oblivion.

You've dropped me into a bottomless pit,

sunk me in a pitch-black abyss.

I'm battered senseless by your rage,

relentlessly pounded by your waves of anger.

You turned my friends against me,

made me horrible to them.

I'm caught in a maze and can't find my way out,

blinded by tears of pain and frustration.

9-12 I call to you, GOD; all day I call.

I wring my hands, I plead for help.

Are the dead a live audience for your miracles?

Do ghosts ever join the choirs that praise you?

Does your love make any difference in a graveyard?

Is your faithful presence noticed in the corridors of hell?

Are your marvelous wonders ever seen in the dark,

your righteous ways noticed in the Land of No Memory?

13-18 I'm standing my ground, GOD, shouting for help,
at my prayers every morning, on my knees each daybreak.
Why, GOD, do you turn a deaf ear?
Why do you make yourself scarce?
For as long as I remember I've been hurting;
I've taken the worst you can hand out, and I've had it.
Your wildfire anger has blazed through my life;
I'm bleeding, black-and-blue.
You've attacked me fiercely from every side,
raining down blows till I'm nearly dead.
You made lover and neighbor alike dump me;
the only friend I have left is Darkness.

Psalm 88 is followed by a very up-beat psalm; but, after the initial "God can..." bit, it is a very dark psalm – maybe the darkest of the psalms. Anyone who has suffered from depression (with or without the hostile circumstances that "explain" the depression) will know where the writer is coming from. David at the time of the revolt of his son Absalom is one guess at the context. It is important to wrestle with the theology. The writer assumes, and many Christians would agree with him, that God is making all the awful things happen: e.g. not lovers, friends, neighbours, family, making bad choices and causing pain, but God making their bad choices for them. I find that way of thinking sheer nonsense. A world in which God makes my best friend betray me is by definition a world in which God determines how I feel about my best friend betraying me! It is a world of automatons, and thus a world without meaning. [Instead of manipulating my best friend's behaviour, God could just give me depression!]

Someone who has done something dreadful might feel, when dreadful things happen to him or her, that God is punishing. Crude, but intelligible. But the psalm writer clearly isn't conscious of having done anything that merits this "punishment". So, if it were punishment, it wouldn't be serving its purpose!

A second line Of "God done it" theory is that God is testing someone. Those who hold this theory really need to explain why God picks some people out to test them with years of sheer hell; while others are tested by having a cosy time!

Where we can't find a clear cause and effect explanation for suffering, it isn't surprising that folk who believe in God ask why God let it happen. There can perhaps sometimes be partially convincing answers to that question. For me. the only answer to Why did God send place X an earthquake, or person Y cancer, is that God didn't! Those at the receiving end and those in a position in some sense to stand beside them, then – with God's help – have choices to make.

As in other Old Testament readings (though by no means all Old Testament readings), absence of belief in a meaningful after life forces the writer to try to make sense out of suffering in this life – without the let-out clause labelled by critics as "pie in the sky when you die". Christians are perfectly entitled to look forward to a world beyond death in which there is no pain, injustice, etc. What they must not do is let the reality of heaven in the future be a justification for failure to fight for less hell now! (Think of the reaction to a doctor saying to a patient "I'm not going to prescribe pain killers: once you are dead there won't be any pain"; or " More pain now will make you appreciate all the more the absence of pain once you are dead"!)

No matching hymns offered for Psalm 88! Instead, cheer yourself up by reading Hymn 348 Hymns Old and New,: Jesus lives! Thy terrors now can no more, O death, appal us:

1 Jesus lives! thy terrors now
Can, O Death, no more appall us;
Jesus lives! by this we know
Thou, O Grave, canst not enthrall us.
Hallelujah!

2 Jesus lives! henceforth is death
But the gate of Life immortal;
This shall calm our trembling breath,
When we pass its gloomy portal.
Hallelujah!

3 Jesus lives! for us He died;
Then alone to Jesus living,
Pure in heart may we abide,
Glory to our Savior giving.
Hallelujah!

4 Jesus lives! our hearts know well
Naught from us His love shall sever;
Life, nor death, nor powers of hell
Tear us from His keeping ever.
Hallelujah!

5 Jesus lives! to Him the Throne
Over all the world is given;
We, in spirit with Him one,
Rest and reign with Him in heaven.
Hallelujah!

The Old Testament Sheol was not a state of total non-existence, but a shadowy existence sort of out of touch with God. God existed for ever, so presumably God's creation (or at least the human part of it) sort of continued – but very definitely not as anything to look forward to. It is interesting to contrast this with pagan notions of the after life, which seem to have been mainly "Carry on as before, including all the earthly inequalities!"

The lessons from Psalm 88 (apart from Thank God for the Resurrection!!!) are: Never give up on talking to God, even if you are not absolutely sure He is paying you any attention. And feel free to talk to God about the doubt and darkness stuff as well as the praise stuff.