

Psalm 88

Introduction

This is the final week of our quick look at more of the book of Psalms, and interestingly all of us have chosen to have a look at laments, which isn't hard because there's quite a concentration of them here in Book Three. But I think Emily said something quite telling last week, when she commented on the turning point of Psalm 77. She said something along the lines of, "It's good that this psalm does not stay in lament but moves to praise, because otherwise it would be very awkward." I think it's fair to say that everyone wants to be happy. For many people, it's their moral compass: "People should do whatever makes them happy, so long as it doesn't hurt other people and make them unhappy."

But life isn't always cheery, like some sort of great party. Sometimes two people people will turn up with a massive difference of opinion, and you have to play the fun game of, "Let's all not fight because it's getting super awkward." Conflict, depression, affliction and desperation are uncomfortable. It means that when we read lament psalms we kind of want to skip over them or hurry on to the end and the reassuring, comfortable, happy part. But we can't do that with Psalm 88. Here, time stands still as we're caught right in the middle of a grindingly difficult time. We're confronted by this guy's horrible situation and what he's going through, and we have to deal with it because there's nowhere else to go. It's difficult, but it's still important.

So what are dealing with here? What our psalm does really well is paint a complex picture of a relationship with God, which we'll explore later, but first of all its point is something that we've heard a fair bit about already from Mark and Em, but which bears looking at some more, namely:

Main Point 1

State

It's okay that everything's not okay.

Show

Here's a sample from our passage that really gets to the heart of the matter:

For my soul is full of trouble
and my life draws near the grave
I am counted among those who go down to the pit
I am like a man without strength
You have taken from me my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them
I am confined and cannot escape
my eyes are dim with grief.
I call to you, LORD, every day
I spread out my hands to you

Explain

It's clear that our psalmist is in a very bad spot. He uses images of disease and destitution, and for him death is a real possibility. We're bombarded with these pictures of the grave, the pit, the darkest depths, mighty waves, grief, destruction, darkness and oblivion. Human responses and human

emotions are so similar, we forget for a moment that this is 5th century Israel because it sounds so much like us when we are at our most desperate. It's a picture of such overwhelming emotion that even if you don't immediately go, "I've so been there," you know immediately where the psalmist is coming from.

There isn't any lower that he can get, and there's no-one left for our psalmist to turn to for help or even just companionship, so he turns to God. And what does he want? Well, of course he wants his situation to change. Whatever this psalmist is going through, this is a position no-one would like to be found in. And he turns to God because he knows that God is powerful enough to make this change happen. After all, he is "Yahweh, the God who saves me." He is the one who "shows wonders", full of "love", "faithfulness" and worthy of "praise". If there is a note of hope in this psalm, it is this confidence in Yahweh to work salvation, the knowledge of who he is because of what he has done. But suffering is a journey, and for this psalmist he is not out the other side yet.

Illustrate

Let me tell you about a friend of mine from Melbourne. When he was at uni, he fell in with what he thought was an amazing new sort of Christian group there. They were all cool and charismatic, and he ended up getting really involved. Unfortunately for him, this group was a cult. He left his family and work, and gave up everything eventually going to live in a commune in the Dandenongs. But one day, the cult leader just disbanded the group, and it was then that my friend realised he had nothing left. He had alienated everyone, he was emotionally and mentally broken, and physically very weak. And he hated God for what had happened to him. It took him many months to recover physically, but many years to recover mentally and spiritually. There is a happy ending, because he did recover. But it was a very long road for him.

Apply

It's okay that things are not okay. That's the way life is, and God gets that. And that's what makes Psalm 88 so valuable to us. It's so real about what our lives can be like, that sometimes things don't get better, that sometimes things get worse. And not only does it show us that we are free to cry out to God in frustration and anger and pain, but it gives us the words to say when we are driven beyond our ability to cope, when our emotions might prevent us from focussing clearly. And it's okay if we don't yet have it together, we're not at that point yet where we can see the light at the end of our journey. But when we are at our lowest, we can cling to this psalm and, as the psalmist did, cling to Yahweh through that lifeline of prayer that is always open to us. No matter what, we can always pray.

But as I noted before, this is an uncomfortable psalm, but I think it's mostly uncomfortable for those of us who haven't been where this psalmist is. On the one hand it seems almost redundant. What could it possibly hold for someone whose life has been pretty fine, thank you? Well, it's in this psalm's confrontational nature that its value lies for those standing on the outside of the pain. It strips back our defences and our easy equilibrium. We are warned against jumping too quickly to the positives, but we are faced with what life is like for so many of our brothers and sisters, and it encourages us to view our communal journey together as a complex pattern of hurt and healing, through which we all grow together.

Transition

But of course there's more challenges here. I mean, have you noticed the sort of language that is used? How can the psalmist even talk like this to God? He gets downright accusatory here, and it sounds really disrespectful. He's in effect saying, "Why do I pray when there's no answer? Why is

God making me suffer?" How can this be at all appropriate?

Main Point 2

State

Well, unfortunately, again the answer isn't particularly comfortable: Let God be God.

Show

The nub of the problem comes in verses such as these:

14 Why, O LORD, do you reject me
and hide your face from me?

15 From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death;
I have suffered your terrors and am in despair.

16 Your wrath has swept over me;
your terrors have destroyed me.

17 All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.

18 You have taken my companions and loved ones from me;
the darkness is my closest friend.

Explain

Whereas in some psalms you have "the enemies" that are the cause of the psalmist's problem, here he lays the blame squarely with God. There's quite a contrast here with what Emily was talking about last week with Psalm 77. If you recall, she was showing how the psalmist there used "I" pronouns when talking about his miserable state but then, when he addressed God with the "you" pronouns, everything took a positive bent. It was like when the psalmists took his focus out from himself to God, things got better.

But not for Psalm 88. Here, when he turns to contemplate God, he doesn't see hope but in fact the source of all his troubles. He can see no human agents around to pin the blame on, he can see no fault of his own that has led to this sort of grief. What's more, God isn't answering his prayers and taking away his suffering, so that seems to logically point to the fact that God is the source of it. So – fair enough – he complains to God and asks why. God promises good things for his people, so why has he delivered bad things instead? There is a feeling here of betrayal as his circumstances are dangerously changed, and the psalmist finds himself in the same position as Job, suffering for no discernible reason. But if that's the case then shouldn't his reaction be like that of Job? "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised?" Why can't he just turn that frown upside down, and praise God despite what he's feeling?

Illustrate

But it's like if you were one of those perfect 1950s housewives, such as those in fictional Good Wife's Guide that pops up on the Internet occasionally. It contains such gems as:

When your husband comes home from work, "Don't greet him with complaints and problems. Don't complain if he's late home for dinner or even if he stays out all night. Count this as minor compared to what he might have gone through that day. Listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first –

remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours.”

Sure, nobody likes to be greeted with problems after they've come home from work, but in this relationship it's completely one-sided: “Well, the oven exploded, little Billy got in a fight, and Betty has ringworm, but no, darling, I want to hear more about how Steve from accounts has decided to buy a new iron.” What's more, the picture here is one where there's this brilliant gloss of happy, where nothing is allowed to be wrong. But that's all it is, a gloss or whitewash over any problems there might be under the surface. So not only is this relationship fake, but the expression of it is one-sided.

Apply

And that's what our relationship with God is if we were only allowed to praise him. To seek to hide our pain from God under a mask of praise is to distance ourselves from him and take hold of a bad faith which is based on fear and guilt, and lived out in practice as resentful or self-deceptive works of righteousness. Not only this, but it is also a wrong view of God. He doesn't want only praise from us, but an open, trusting closeness, where we can have the freedom to open up to him about our lives. He is a God who gives honour and vindication to the most vulnerable and a voice to the voiceless. To deny that voice that cries out from a position of vulnerability and pain, like in this psalm here, is not in God's nature. He wants us to come to him when we are in need of his help. There should be no fear of rejection here: it doesn't matter who we are or where we're at, God welcomes us. So even if we think this language here is abrasive and rude, it's a real expression from real circumstances and should not be suppressed.

But we need to let God be God, and recognise that sometimes things happen for reasons that are unknown to us. Just as sometimes there is no finality to our pain in this life, sometimes there just simply are no answers to what we're going through. As in this psalm, we're left hanging with no resolution. We may demand a reason from God, like the psalmist here, and that's perfectly okay, but if we don't get an answer, we should be okay with that. After all, God is the one who is absolutely sovereign over all of reality, and he operates on a level that is much higher than ours. For example, the psalmists asks,

10 Do you show your wonders to the dead?

Do their spirits rise up and praise you?

11 Is your love declared in the grave,
your faithfulness in Destruction?

12 Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

And he's expecting a no answer, logically. But this is God we're talking about. In Christ, there is a resounding yes to all these. God can break our expectations when things go wrong when we think they should be right, but he also breaks our expectations of hopelessness. He is a mighty and, frankly, extravagant God, and we need to be ready for our expectations to be broken.

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, Psalm 88 presents a complex picture of our relationship with God. It is one where God remains mysterious even when he does reveal himself to us. We stand before this God, humbled, aware of our finiteness and limitations in the face of his infinite wisdom and power, but he does not expect us to know everything, to be infinite. He makes himself dangerously available, who lets us come to him and complain to him with our darkest feelings.

When we're faced with terrible moments in our lives, we have two options. We can ignore God, try and fix it on our own or simply sit in our own grief without reference to him, or we can cry out to him. See, even when we're angry with God, we're affirming four things: (1) God exists, (2) God is responsible for what goes on in our lives, (3) God has the power to do something about our problems, and (4) we're relying on him for that change. rEven here, at the bottom of the pit, the psalmist still clings to God. Wrestling with God has value even when we fail to find answers. It places our reliance on him and asserts that his rule embraces all of our lives, even when we feel that he is far from us, even in the deepest of darkness.