

Psalm 88

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[0 : 00] When I thought about what should I preach in Bon Accord on the Sunday evening, I thought I would focus on a passage that means a lot to those among whom I serve, amongst the Amakaza in the Eastern Cape.

This is not an easy passage, and this is not an easy sermon to bring before you this evening. We will deal with heavy matters, but these are matters which your brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus are facing daily.

And I want you to think about this passage and think of how appropriate it is for them, and I believe also for some of you perhaps here this evening, if not now.

Then, in the days ahead. This psalm ends, The darkness is my closest friend.

I remember being in a discussion with a friend, and he was bemoaning the demise of the tradition of protest songs.

[1 : 23] They're real folks. He loved protest songs. And he's saying, you don't get protest songs now. Even the charts are full of happy body numbers.

People want to be upbeat. You don't get the protest songs anymore. Psalm 88 is a protest song. And it's a protest song directed towards God Almighty. And if you read through the book of Psalms, which I hope you do regularly, you will encounter psalms like this throughout it.

Yes, there are the upbeat. Yes, there are the joyful. But there are many, many songs protesting to God.

The Bible isn't afraid of having ease in. Of complaint and lament. Bringing God the problems and lays clearly before him.

[2 : 34] And Psalm 88 is a passionate protest to God. It is one of those psalms of lament and complaint.

It is probably the bleakest psalm in the whole psalm book. Perhaps one of the bleakest passages in the whole Bible.

One of the commentators, Derek Kirchner, says, there is no sadder psalm in the Psalter. He's probably right. Scholars have wondered that.

Who wrote this psalm? Who is the psalmist? Is Haman the Ezraite, one of the sons of Korah? Is that a quote? And they try to identify who this might be.

Who is bringing these statements to God, complaining? Some think it could be Job. But there's no evidence. Some think it's Hezekiah when he was ill.

[3 : 38] And cries out to God. Some think it's Uzziah, the king struck down with leprosy. Who cries out to God for help. In his time of pain and ostracization.

Some have even suggested it was Jeremiah in prison. The fact is, we don't know. We don't know who wrote this psalm. We can't place it.

We can't work out the background details. But perhaps we're not supposed to. Perhaps we're to take this psalm as it is. A painful protest song to God.

Passionate and full of imagery that shocks us. So that we might enter in and own that psalm for ourselves.

And bring it to God in our prayer time. And say, God, are you listening to us? It's strange that this isn't just a psalm for an individual.

[4 : 45] This is a part of the worship book of Israel. This is to be sung at times collectively by the people of God. Gathered together. To bring the complaints to God.

Sung in the synagogues of Jesus' day. Appropriate then. Appropriate even today. And this psalm cries out almost from beginning to end.

And it leaves us unsettled. We are not conditioned for this. We live in a world that's supposed to be upbeat and positive.

And we shy away from those things that are painful and hurtful. We don't want anything to do with it. When it comes to God, we want to be polite.

Reverential. We say to ourselves, I can't tell God that. I can't explain what's going on in my mind. I said, God, need Jesus to see it.

[5 : 54] He knows. But we have this fear of opening up and being honest to God. We prefer to have things nice, polite, clean, and not able to take offense.

But the psalms are not like that. The psalms are honest. The psalms get down in the muck and wrestle with God like Jacob wrestling with the angel.

We don't know what's going on, but we want God to listen. And this psalmist, Psalm 88, and the other psalms of lament and complaint, they are saying, God, do you see this?

We are holding you to account for you, our God. They are aware of their circumstances. They are also aware that they belong to the covenant people of God.

And because of the covenant situation, I will be your God, you will be my people. They are saying, excuse me, have you seen this? Do you understand what we are going through?

[7 : 18] Listen up. Please listen to us as we make you aware. These are brutally honest. And that leaves us uncomfortable.

Psalm 88 is almost unique in this. It brings the accusations to God that God is in the dock.

There are several complaints that the psalmist brings. He says, God, you're silent, you're distant. I am set apart, verse 5, with the dead. Like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.

God, you're silent. You're distant. You're no longer with us. What's the matter? Perhaps even more challenging, the psalmist says, You are punishing us.

God, this refrain appears throughout. Verse 7, Your wrath lies heavily upon me. You have overwhelmed me with all your ways.

[8 : 27] Or verse 15, From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death. I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. Verse 16, Your wrath has swept over me.

Your terrors have destroyed me. God, why are you punishing me? Almost has God as the very enemy.

The psalms of lament often point to an external enemy. Psalm 142 that we sang pointed to an enemy. Out there, over there.

Do you see him, Lord? Over there. But this psalm is saying, You're the one, God. You're the one that's bringing this to us. To me. There's no reference here to any other enemy except God.

It's God who is causing, it would appear, this psalmist's state of mind. Psalm 88 is also unique in that There seems to be no respite.

[9 : 34] No ending with that kernel of hope. That little bit of praise to hang on to. Like so many of the psalms of complaint. There seems to be no end.

Indeed, the Hebrew ends in the psalm with one word. The darkness. The darkness. No joyful ending.

Sure, there's an affirmation of hope at the beginning of verse 1. O Lord, the dead who saves me day and night, I cry before you. But after that, well, the psalm becomes much darker and darker until darkness pervades all.

All faith seems to evaporate like the dew in a hot morning. One of the commentators says, if you're going to have a title for a psalm, how about a psalm for the totally disorientated?

So here is a heartfelt and needy prayer that speaks from this psalmist's situation.

[10 : 55] He is severely afflicted and feels at the very point of death. Now you're probably saying, what about today?

How relevant is that today? What hope does psalm 88 bring in a world that is full of darkness to people who are truly suffering? Well, this psalm has brought much comfort to those in South Africa. there are some points of contact in the psalm that are worth noting. Because the people, and many of the people in the Knox district are suffering in ways that they can grab this psalm for themselves and say, that's true of me.

I can have this psalm. I can own this psalm. I can enter into it and take it for myself. And I can speak to God with this language. And I wanted to note just a few points.

You may well know, firstly, there is a massive problem in South Africa with HIV. They reckon that there are 6 million people who are HIV positive in South Africa out of 42 million.

[12:17] 6 million out of 40. That's one in seven people infected. That 40,000 people die from age-related diseases every month.

Every month. And trust me, many of the funerals that I take bear witness to that fact of young and old. 800,000 people, they believe, are newly infected each year.

That number is growing and getting worse. And for those who have HIV, things are not bright.

There is a push by action groups to have antiretroviral drugs handed out. But up until now, only 140,000 people have been given those drugs.

They're so expensive. The health service is deteriorating. And so if you have HIV, if you found out to be infected, that you are HIV positive, the diagnosis isn't good at all.

[13:35] Drugs are too expensive. And so people try and grasp everything that they can to help them, to bring them some relief, to keep them from infections.

But too often the doctors say, I'm sorry. I'm sorry your results have come back, your HIV positive. There's nothing I can do.

These people are living a death sentence it seems for many, going month by month, trying any terrible remedy and any new thing on the block if they can afford it.

Otherwise, they seem to resign and head on home to die. People are suffering. They're like that.

And people, like a mama who had a stroke in the congregation, paralyzed down one side and released the next day with a paracetamol tablet for pain relief.

[14:46] No occupational therapy, no speech therapy, all carried by her family to the taxis to take her home to lie her down. She can understand.

As for the HIV, doesn't it, say, I am set apart with the dead. I am set apart with the dead like the slain who lie in the grave whom you remember no more who are cut off from your care.

They can own that. They understand that. When the psalmist says it, they can say, Amen, brother. Amen, sister.

What about those who suffer great hardship in South Africa? There are many people who are infected by HIV unwittingly.

Infected by their husbands. Infected because of rape. For many reasons. And often they take upon themselves and feel, why is God punishing me?

[16:02] Why, Fundisi, have I got this? I didn't do anything wrong! Why have I got this disease?

I may feel that God is somehow punishing them. The people in the community look in and they look down their noses and they go, cut, cut, cut, immoral lifestyle.

And it's very often far of the case. they say, ah, God's punishing that individual. That's how they've got the disease.

But the psalmist says, you wrath light heavily upon me. You have overwhelmed me with all your waves. Why God?

Why me? Why now? Why with all my children still alive? Who's going to look after them? Why are you punishing me?

[17:06] Many young people come back from the cities, from Houteng, from Johannesburg, and Port Elizabeth, and Cape Town.

They come back to the villages. Many of them are infected with HIV and AIDS. They may be suffering from tuberculosis or susceptible to other infections.

They have a very high rate of meningitis. They come home. And they're frightened to come home, some of them, because they don't know what the family is going to say to them.

The family can see that they are now virtually a shell of what they were. skin and bones, sunken cheeks.

They've come home. They may be HIV positive and keeping it quiet, but eventually it gets out and many families can't cope. Can't cope.

[18:13] They're frightened themselves of catching the disease wrongly, very often. They're frightened they might catch the infection, so the daughter or the son is given a separate plate and a separate cup and a separate spoon and blow the danger if you touch the other.

Given the food at the end, making sure everything's clean and for many families they just cannot cope. And often these children, their loved ones are put out, put out of home, told to go.

They're bringing shame on the family, they're bringing shame on the village, they're bringing shame on us. We can't cope with your disease. We're frightened we'll catch it. Please, just leave. Verse 8, you've taken me from my closest friend to the psalmist and have made me repulsive to them.

How graphic. But it's true today. one of the things in our church, I've drawn it home.

I don't want these young people lying at home, scared to come to church, scared to be with the people of God. What comfort can they have? Get them to church so they need to hear God's word.

[19 : 45] They sing Psalm 88 for themselves and ask God the questions. fourth, it's very difficult to find accurate statistics in South Africa and sometimes statistics just roll off the tongue and roll over the heads.

But they reckon that there are 70,000 children born each year who are HIV positive. 70,000 children every year.

in East London, which is their nearest major town, the social workers who deal with children said that in 13 months, 120,000 children went through their system to be replaced, to find a home, to be put in an orphanage because they had no one to look after them or they had been handed in or left in hospitals or left in the door of a church.

120,000 children and it scares everyone. The number of children that you see in the villages, it's children and old people.

And many of these children have no parents now. Many of these children are being looked after by granny. Many of them are infected. They may never know it.

[21 : 21] But they're there. And some have said, we can't cope with this. We're having a generation of orphans. From my youth, verse 15, from my youth I have been afflicted and close to death.

To go to the children's home and king to see the children and to wonder how long has that little one got. Receiving the care, the love in a Christian environment, but struggling.

normally, orphans would go back home to be with the extended family.

You go into the villages and granny on her pension of about 50 pounds a month is looking after children, great grandchildren, a great mixture of nephews and nieces.

granny trying to do it all, perhaps on her pension, taps it a little more, often, if not much at all. And the families are breaking down, granny can't cope, the extended family can't cope, and for a cause I've said, that is frightening, because the cause I have this trevor which says, don't you, don't you, go back to you.

[22 : 49] A person is a person because of other people. And here is the family, the closest group of people, not able to cope with one of their own children.

Granny can't cope. And the child is handed over, or the mother hands the child over in a hospital after it's born, because she knows there can't be another mouth to feed.

But it has a knock-on effect, especially for young boys. there's no home, there's no family.

The boys can say, what, what tribe do I belong? I know I'm father, but I'm a single or a member. I need to know, because when I need to become a man, I need to go to the bush and be circumcised, for which group guy go in?

if I don't get circumcised properly, I'm not a man. He's alone, and struggling, with no role models around the bottom in a children's home, doing the best they can.

[24 : 05] And the boys are left, very often the boys are left by foster homes and those for adoption. girls bringing money to get married.

It's as simple as that. There's always the hope of the bride price for a girl, but for a boy, you're going to have to pay if he gets married.

We can't cope with that. You have taken, verse 18, my companions and loved ones from me.

All these lands, girls, not knowing where they're from, except a home here or a home there.

Not being able to participate in conversations that are everyday, one-to-one conversations. How are you? Where are you from? What is your tribe?

[25 : 05] What village do you come from? And often can't answer many of these questions. he's a nobody, a non-person, with no family, no one around him, no loved ones to call his own.

Look at the parallels in this passage. They can take these, they can say, yes, yes, I can understand that, I'm there, I'm in the midst of that, that's my situation.

the psalm has proved a great comfort to those suffering throughout the villages of Knox, to those coming to town quietly for an AIDS group in the various churches in King.

But we are not in South Africa, are we? what's used as this psalm for us today? I can see how the people can bring their desolation and despair to God Almighty in prayer in South Africa, but what about us?

What does this psalm teach us here in 21st century Scotland? Perhaps it's going to encourage us, first is to empathise, help us at least a little to think about those who are suffering with AIDS and HIV, who are suffering in the congregations in South Africa, throughout Africa, there, on their own. [26 : 51] Perhaps it'll help us to get involved in various projects that might help out in the home, the children's home, or involved action campaigns to target those in great need.

Perhaps it'll prompt us to pray for them. It's been said that this scourge of AIDS is like the leprosy of the times of Jesus and the times of the Bible.

And Bono recently commended and said, at least this kind of church hasn't mucked it up. That we're involved. That we're there.

Perhaps it'll help us to understand the poor, the widows, and the orphans of all that they go through in coping with the disease, to suffer with it, to care those who are suffering from it.

We need to empathize. We need to belong, to stand alongside, to understand a little more, to judge others a little less quickly, to put an arm around and to help, and to help those in Aberdeen or in the college or in the old people's home, who are suffering, who feel lost and desolate and unloved by their families, feeling that nobody cares, that God has left them, to the carers who suffer, who try and say, I can't cope with my parents with Alzheimer's.

[28 : 51] to say, have you taken it to God, and to be there with them, to help, to empathize with their situation.

It asks us, encourages us, empathize, care for these people, care for those in the society around about us, who are suffering in various ways, in the breakdown of relationships, to come alongside, to offer help, practical, spiritual, financial, whatever it might be.

But this psalm is also an expression of faith. Now, it doesn't look like it. It looks like one long list of moaning and rejection of God.

You could say, well, yeah, I can see faith in verse one and verse two, but nowhere else. Well, certainly, there's not a great deal of praise here.

This is not a joyful, happy psalm, marching up to Jerusalem for one of the great feasts. But it is a psalm of faith.

[30 : 13] because this man, he comes to God. He addresses God. And he does so repeatedly.

Oh, Lord, the God who saved me day and night, I cry to you. Verse nine, my eyes are dim with three. I call to you, oh, Lord, every day I spread out my hands to you.

Verse 13, but I cry to you for help, oh, Lord, in the morning, my prayer comes before you. He comes to God and addresses God by name.

Repeatedly. I don't think he just prayed to God in the morning. I think this is an all-day constant prayer by this psalmist. This is not one action or one-off.

He's struggling. This psalmist, yes, he's struggling to praise God. He's struggling even perhaps to believe in God or to believe that God cares for him.

[31 : 21] But still, he comes. He doesn't give up. Repeatedly, he comes to God and uses the divine name.

Do you notice it? Lord. You'll know that that's the covenant name, more than capital, covenant name, Yahweh. He uses the covenant name of God, and it's deliberate.

This is the God who has revealed himself to his people, who has promised to be with his people, to take care of his people, both collectively as a nation and individually to those who belong to Israel. He doesn't come to God and say, oh, great creator of the universe, the one who sustains. He gets down to the nitty gritty. He said, remember this name, remember this name that you gave, you revealed yourself.

Yahweh, Lord, I'm using it. I'm saying, it's time to honor the covenant on your side, oh, Lord.

[32 : 36] Remember the relationship you promised, your people. Please, come to us, come to me, and honor your covenant commitments with me.

This, this man, this member of the sons of Korah, one of the presenters, one of the worship team, he comes to God, and he says, remember your covenant, now I want to see it in action, I need to see it in action.

We sometimes, we jump back from that. We don't like having our doubts expressed to God, kind of unsettling and comforting.

we're safe with faith which can be expressed as in full bloom.

If you turn on the television sets in South Africa, some of the most popular preachers from America, because we have a religious, a Christian television channel, are all the health, wealth, and prosperity guys from America.

[33 : 58] and it's having a knock-on effect in the broader community and in the wider churches around about our area and yet the whole of South Africa. We can be positive, but if you're positive and feel safe, God's going to bless us.

And so we have ministers in churches around the village, not in the villages, who drive the green, who drive the Mercedes-Benz, who've got the latest gizmos, both white and black, because that's what's expected of life, living with real faith.

Because if you don't have real faith, ah, that's why God is cursing you. That's why God isn't blessing you or answering your prayer. So faith, in all its fullness, is lifted up as the greatest virtue of all, and those who struggle are looked down upon as said, give yourself a shake, have more faith, then you'd see God work, then you'd see yourself healed, your HIV status would be turned round.

If only you had faith, real faith, strong faith, they forget that that's not what the Bible says.

There are times when dead people struggle, who don't know what to do when their loved one is in intensive care for week upon week upon week, and nothing seems to be happening.

[35 : 42] Life has to be in all its parts, and faith must be seen not only as it and will bloom, which can happen.

But sometimes in a season it rains when the pressure comes. There are some people, perhaps you're one of them, this evening that says, you know God, I'm hanging on.

I feel like I'm at the edge of a precipice, and things are crumbling even there, I'm hanging on for dear life, God, come behold and lift me up out of this.

I can't take it anymore. When are I going to see your hand in action? And this psalmist is doing exactly the same.

He has faith, otherwise he wouldn't be here, he wouldn't be composing, he wouldn't be bringing it to God and laying it there. He brings it to God.

[36 : 57] He's putting the covenant to the test. This psalm finally tells us that we are to be honest, to be realistic.

Coming back to Britain and seeing the advert, especially on the Saturday morning, we let the children watch some Saturday morning TV. You, Dad, Dad, see these adverts, oh, these toys, and their eyes are popping out their heads, they've never seen anything like this.

Dad, this teddy bear shines. Buy this and be happy. Buy this and be content. You look at all your adverts, not only the children's toys, it's this promise of happiness ever after.

And it's a plaguing the church in South Africa. Have faith, happy ever after. What a lad. What a con. Smart suit, nice smile, no gospel. What a lie to people who are suffering. for God and live happily ever after.

[38 : 18] It isn't true. As Sam says to us, we have to have life, have faith in life, whatever comes along, we have to have faith.

The good days and the bad, we have to be realistic. And that realistic life is to inform and instruct, to mold our prayer lives to God.

To bring it to God and to say, God, where are you? Help me. So much of modern church music doesn't have that aspect that all individuals, all upbeat, it's a place for us, yes.

But it isn't all of life. We have to be taken our prayer lives and be honest to God, like Job. Look, read the book of Job, see how honest he was, see how abrupt he was, look at the language, look how he condemns God, but yet at the end, it's not the sweet words of the council that is commended, it's Job that is commended, who said so many terrible things to God, because he was speaking from his heart, by faith, in faith.

God can take it. God isn't shocked. He sees into our hearts, he knows the words on our lips, in our prayers, before they're said, be honest, be real with him, so that our prayer life can be fully armed and relevant to our actual day-to-day life.

[40 : 17] Let me conclude. Sure, Kidna may be right, there might not be a father song in the whole of the self-sulter, but there is something here to hold on to.

There is encouragement for us to empathize with those suffering. We are told to express our faith, and we're told to be real, be real in our Christian lives, to expect there may be all the difficulties, and to be real with God in our prayers.

These words, Sam, ends, yes, with desolate words, the darkness is my closest friend.

But it's part of God's words, part of God's songbook. He wants us to use it, to take it, to apply it for ourselves when we need to write it.

The psalmist feels that in darkness. But this evening, help us remember the one who hung on a cross in literal darkness as the sun was covered up and darkness strangely came upon that Jerusalem day and who knew the darkness spiritually of a God who had left them.

[41 : 54] And the words that Jesus used are the words from the psalm book. The words that we are encouraged to use for ourselves.

He found words there to describe his utter desolation. we are commended to do likewise. This light is not shining much for this poor man, the son of Korah.

If he's still doing his duties, they are done with a heavy heart in the temple. But the light isn't extinguished completely. It's the dark night of the soul, yes.

but he's holding on tight to God for grim life of us. I'm not letting go of you. And if you are in the darkness tonight, take courage and hold on to the Lord of the Covenant, the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not let him go.

Your faith may be weak, but he is strong. I'm able. And may we all go from this place to empathize with those who are physically safe, God, who are spiritually disorientated, to help them with sensitivity, to help them effectively, to help them really in life as it is.

[43 : 33] May God help us to do such a thing. Amen.