

PRAYING THE PSALMS

DEPTHS OF DESPAIR

Saturday, January 13

Reading: Psalm 88

Psalm 88:2 *May my prayer come before You; turn Your ear to my cry. 3 I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death.*

“And they lived happily ever after.” That is the way fairy tales end. That’s the way we like it! When a movie or TV program does not tie things up in a neat bow and leave us with a warm fuzzy feeling we get upset. We like happy endings.

Many of the psalms record the attack of enemies and the feelings of abandonment and sorrow it brings. The psalmists often spill out their hearts to God in words of complaint and agony of soul. But they all resolve at some point into an affirmation of their trust in God. All, that is, except for Heman the Ezrahite.

We know little more than this man’s name. There are several people named Heman in the books of Chronicles but we cannot be sure if any of them refer to the Heman who wrote Psalm 88. This is the only psalm he is credited with writing. And that is probably a good thing. I don’t know if we could take much more of Heman’s woes.

The psalm starts out alright with Heman proclaiming, “LORD, You are the God who saves me.” But it goes downhill from there as Heman sinks deeper into despair. He ends with the sad cry, “You have taken from me friend and neighbor - darkness is my closest friend.”

What could have caused this man to fall into such depths of depression? Some have deduced that Heman may have had leprosy. He talks about suffering and being near death from his youth (88:15) and how his friends have been taken away and consider him repulsive (88:16). All this is consistent with lepers in ancient Israel. They were considered unclean and ostracized from society. They could not be touched and when anyone approached them, they had to yell “unclean” as a warning to stay away. If Heman was a leper it would not be difficult to understand why he is so overwhelmed (88:3, 7, 16-17).

There is one glimmer of hope in Heman’s words. He never gives up on prayer. Even though he is in utter despair and even blames God for his agony (88:5-7, 14-18) he continues to bring his complaint to the Lord (88:1-2, 9, 13). That is the purpose of lament. In our darkest times when even God seems to have turned away, we can cry out in lament. We may be struggling for days or even years, but we must hold on to God.

PRAYER THOUGHT: In his book A Sacred Sorrow, Michael Card puts it this way:

[Lament] provides the only trustworthy bridge to God across the deep seismic quaking of our lives...Those who are truly intimate with the Father know they can pour out any hurt, disappointment, temptation, or even anger with which they struggle...Far from denying the existence of God, the lament of faith cries out on the basis of an appeal to the living God’s loving-kindness, in spite of the fact that the present conditions would suggest otherwise...we discover a person who will simply not let go of God.”¹

¹ Michael Card. A Sacred Sorrow, p. 31, 39