

Praying To An Absent God

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It is painful to pray to an absent God; most of us have felt that pain at some time in our lives. One feels alone, cut off; no answer comes and no light penetrates the thick darkness; it is the winter of the soul and one fears the killing snows will never pass.

The Psalms are replete with expressions of lament and plea, of complaint and pathetic cry. They are expressions of deep human feeling and experience, the anguish of the soul and longing of the heart. Jesus found articulation of the desolation and horror, of the aloneness, the forsakenness that he experienced in crucifixion by reciting a Psalm. His piercing cry of excruciating pain, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" comes from Psalm 22. It has been understood as the expression of ultimate aloneness and dereliction, and it is that. Yet, those chilling words are not the whole Psalm. To be sure, there are few more poignant expressions of pain anywhere than Psalm 22. However, some biblical expositors suggest that what has come to us as a word from the cross was part of a recitation of the Psalm by Jesus. In the depths of anguish, he reached for the Psalmist's expression by which to give utterance to what he was experiencing, but he most likely recited the Psalm to its end and it ends in an expression of trust. Light has broken through, the darkness is scattered, praise returns to the Psalmist's heart. Thus, the recitation was perhaps the consummate act of trust by Jesus.

That is the way it is in the rich and varied outpouring of spiritual life that we find in the Psalms. Lament, plea, complaint, even angry challenge to God are common, but before the Psalm is concluded, some resolution has been experienced, a sense of being heard and helped is declared and praise ensues. That is the way it is in all cases save one; Psalm 88 is a cry in the darkness and the Psalm ends with thick darkness still enveloping the Psalmist's soul. There is no lightening of the burden, no assuaging of the pain, no sense of being heard, no

promise of healing. Psalm 88 is a bitter cry to an absent God and the soul finds no relief.

*O Lord, my God, by day I call for help,
by night I cry aloud in Thy presence.*

But no help is found;
I ... *have become like a man beyond help,
like a man who lies dead...*

Still the Psalmist persists;
*I have called upon thee, o Lord, every day and spread out my hands
in prayer to thee.*

...
*But, Lord, I cry to thee,
my prayer comes before thee in the morning.
Why hast thou cast me off, o Lord,
why dost thou hide thy face from me?*

The Psalm ends with these pathetic words;
*Thou hast taken lover and friend far from me,
and parted me from my companions.*

The mystery of suffering prevails; no shaft of light breaks the grip of darkness. Thunderous silence is heaven's mute reply; prayer is raised to no avail, for God is absent. Leaf through the Psalter; see if Psalm 88 is not unique in that no final resolution is found, no word of hope offered, no sense of grace expressed.

It stands alone; still it has found a place in Israel's hymnbook. It is not familiar; it would not be on anyone's "best-loved" list. Yet, within the rich variety of spiritual expression in the Psalms, its voice is heard. Then perhaps we should "hear" it.

There is a temptation to limit our devotional reading to a few selected favorites. And there are so many inspiring, uplifting passages of Scripture, why pause to consider this painful cry? One would seldom find this text listed for Sunday morning's message; its positive possibilities are severely limited. Who wants to come to church to hear of the agony of praying to an absent God? Perhaps we should simply cut this Psalm out of the collection; in fact, by our selective usage, that is precisely what we have done. Why stop to consider Psalm 88, then?

Because life is like that even though it is threatening to our traditional piety to admit it, even though the fact is rarely mentioned in church.

But life for many is like that; for some all the time, and for all, some of the time. The experience of praying to an absent God is a not uncommon experience even though we do not speak much of it. Honesty demands that we acknowledge that

even for the child of God there are periods of pain that know no relief, times of deep darkness when no ray of light brings comfort.

In *The Message of the Psalms*, Walter Brueggemann speaks of Psalm 88 as leaving us “lingering in the unresolve, dangling in the depth of the pit without any explicit sign of rescue.” He goes on to assert,

That is an important statement to have in the repertoire, precisely because life is like that. Faith does not always resolve life. There is not for every personal crisis of disorientation a way out, if only we can press the right button. Too much pastoral action is inclined and tempted to resolve things, no matter how the situation really is. Faith is treated like the great answer book. (p. 78)

Sometimes when the way is hard and bitter and God seems deaf to our urgent appeal, we are made to feel that the problem must be with us - our sin and guilt, our feeble faith or faint devotion. It must be me; no aspersion must be cast on God.

Clichés trip lightly over the tongues of the untroubled, assured in their safe tranquility that if there is a communication blackout, the problem lies not on the side of deity. Thereby we often add to the sufferer’s burden of alienation a load of guilt, undercutting perhaps the last vestige of self-confidence and self-worth.

Not so Psalm 88 and that is why it is so important that it has found place in the Psalter. Brueggemann writes,

Psalm 88 is adamant in its insistence, and it is harsh on Yahweh’s unresponsiveness. The truth of this Psalm is that Israel lives in a world where there is no answer. We are not offered any speculative answer... The Psalm is not interested in any theological reason Yahweh may have. The Psalm is from Israel’s side. It engages in no speculation. It asks no theological question. It simply reports on how it is to be a partner of Yahweh in Yahweh’s inexplicable absence. (p. 78F)

We have not done well with inexplicable absence, with unanswered questions, with a silent God. To that extent we have not always been honest with human experience or honest with God and we have not joined in solidarity with the pain of the wounded ones.

We are nervous before the mystery of suffering. We want to be in control, to manage the situation, to bring a cure; but sometimes we can only be present to the pain and wait in silence.

In his meditation, *Out of Solitude*, Henri Nouwen writes of the ministry of Jesus. He points out,

What we see, and like to see, is cure and change. But what we do not see and do not want to see is care, the participation in the pain, the solidarity in suffering, the sharing in the experience of brokenness. And still, cure without care is as dehumanizing as a gift given with a cold heart. (p. 31F)

The persons who mean the most to us, Nouwen contends, are the ones who can be silent with us in moments of despair, who will stay with us in an hour of grief,

who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness. (p. 34)

That, insists Nouwen, is the person who cares. But our tendency is to run from painful realities, to try to change them. We are more comfortable as rulers, controllers, manipulators, but sometimes the human circumstance will not yield to the “quick fix.” Such “cure” without care is violent and insensitive; it leaves the suffering one even more alone in her pain.

Nouwen condemns the preachers who reduce mysteries to problems and offer Band-Aid-type solutions. It is only out of compassionate solidarity with the one suffering that healing comes forth.

Those who do not run away from our pains but touch them with compassion bring healing and new strength. The paradox indeed is that the beginning of healing is in the solidarity with the pain. (*Reaching Out*, p. 43)

When there are no answers, when pain will not be alleviated, it just may be that the only comfort would be the comfort of such a word as Psalm 88 that acknowledges the pain that knows no healing. According to Brueggemann,

... The speaker is shunned and in darkness. The last word in the Psalm is darkness. The last word is darkness. The last theological word is darkness. Nothing works. Nothing is changed. Nothing is resolved. All things deny life. And worst of all is the “shunning.” (p. 80)

Brueggemann raises the obvious question, “So, what is one to do about it?” The answer he gives is, “Wait.” That, he says, is what Israel has been doing for a long time. Wait or speak it again; keep on crying out.

One has two options: either to wait in silence, or to speak it again. What one may not do is to rush to an easier Psalm, or to give up on Yahweh. (p. 80)

Why does this Psalm appear in the Bible? As stated above, life is like that and the Bible addresses life - all of life, not just the pleasant parts. But beyond that, this is not a psalm of mute depression. It is still speech, speech addressed to God.

In the bottom of the Pit, Israel still knows it has to do with Yahweh. (p. 80)

Sometimes God's presence is most poignant precisely in the absence. Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why are you absent?" and paradoxically, that is the time and place of God's nearness, of the ultimate expression of his love.

When there is no answer, when one wearies of speech, then it is that one can only wait; but that word found frequently in the Psalms is not simply passive resignation, but rather "hoping intensely." Sometimes one can only hope intensely in the darkness, conscious of a presence in the absence.

Psalm 88 is not scripture's only word, nor is it the last word. But in some situations of human suffering it may be the only word that can evoke any resonance in the anguished soul. We must have enough trust in the good and gracious God to let that word come to expression, to stay with it and let it be the present word of the God who is currently known only as absence. To wait in such a time of not-knowing and non-healing is the most helpful support that the sufferer can receive and the most caring ministry another can offer.

Within history there is not always resolution;

beyond history there is resurrection.

Thanks be to God!

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