

# WHITE MEMORIAL

## PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

### WMPC - Men's Bible Study

Psalm Eighty Eight - Spring 2017

Lesson 4

---

#### Read Psalm 88

(Read the psalm out loud, not just silently.)

#### THREE QUESTIONS:

**Q1:** What are your initial impressions of the psalm after reading it a few times? What do you notice about the content that is present? Do you think any content is missing here, in comparison to other Psalms with which you're familiar?

**Q2:** Most psalms of lament—which Psalm 88 is often classified as—end up concluding with light and hope in God, having started in darkness and dejection. (See the familiar Psalm 22 for an example.) With regard to the psalmist's emotional state and disposition in Psalm 88, however, the prayer of lament ends where it begins. There is no resolution. Do you think there's any way to read/pray this psalm as an affirmation of faith of some sort? Think of your own life: do your prayers ever sound like this?

**Q3:** Do you remember this psalm ever being read in worship? No? Well, that may be because the Revised Common Lectionary doesn't include Psalm 88. Ever. Are Christians missing anything to never hear this psalm read and prayed in the context of worship? Why or why not? Can you think of a moment when it was a relief to externalize your own distress, be that through prayer or conversing with a trusted friend?

#### THREE INSIGHTS:

**I1:** Verses 8 and 18 each cast Yahweh as a complicit party in the psalmist's suffering, but there's more than blame going on here. J. Clinton McCann writes the following on this curious component of the psalm:

The psalmist's situation is similar in many ways to that of the servant in Isaiah 53 and of Job; like Isaiah 53 and the book of Job, Psalm 88 prompts a re-evaluation of suffering, both human and divine. The theological problems and possibilities are posed most sharply, perhaps, by the two verses that conclude each of the psalmist's complaints (vv. 8, 18). God has caused the psalmist's suffering and isolation....In short, God is the problem (see also vv. 6-7, 14, 16-17). But God is also the solution! The psalmist's prayer itself is evidence that she or he is convinced that even life's worst moments somehow

have to do with God. So the psalmist's cries continue to arise out of the depths (see Ps 130:1).<sup>1</sup>

**I2:** "Psalm 88 is an embarrassment to conventional faith. ... It militates against every theology of glory, against every theology that imagines that things can be resolved, that there are answers, and that we go from 'strength to strength.' Psalm 88 shows us what the cross is all about: *faithfulness* in scenes of complete *abandonment*. ... Psalm 88 stands as a mark of realism for biblical faith. It has its pastoral use, because there are situations in which easy, cheap talk of resolution must be avoided. Here are words not to be used frequently, but for the limited experiences when words must be honest and not claim too much."<sup>2</sup>

**I3:** The Psalms are the prayer book of the Church; they are a "holy cheat sheet" for us. Bonhoeffer said that the psalms are given to us for the express purpose of learning to pray them in the name of Jesus. But how can a psalm like this one be prayed in Jesus' name? How can a psalm like this be prayed by those of us who cannot presently relate to the despair and anguish expressed herein? Reading—praying!—psalms like these, even when our personal mood is different from the spirit of the psalm, is one way to involve ourselves with the entire communion of saints. Because we know a lament like this one is at every moment the experience of at least a few members of the body. (Can you think of a brother or sister in Christ for whom Psalm 88 rings especially true right now? For whom it seems like darkness is their only companion?)

#### **THREE LINKS FOR FURTHER STUDY:**

**L1:** The Bible Project's [Read Scripture Series - Psalms](#) is a worthwhile introduction to the overarching composition of the 150 poems that comprise the book of Psalms. Especially relevant for this week's study of Psalm 88 are the remarks towards the end of the video concerning what psalms of lament have to teach us about prayer and the life of faith.

**L2:** [Hope: A Mid-Winter Reflection](#), by Jason Goroncy. This is a blogpost from a pastor and theologian at Whitley College in Australia. In it, he reflects on Psalm 88 in the context of the hope afforded to us by Jesus' resurrection.

**L3:** Stephen Muse, a pastoral psychotherapist, writes about faith's suffering and paradox of Psalm 88 in [No Dead Man's Prayer](#), an article published in the Mar/Apr 2013 issue of *Touchstone*.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol IV (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) p. 1029.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984), pp. 78, 81.