

July 31, 2016 “The Terrible Silence of God” Psalm 88

I must begin this morning with a word of confession. Psalm 88 is not my favourite Psalm. In fact I would not (if I had a choice) rate it in my top 25 Psalms. And of course there is a reason for that. And the reason is this: I have been there. It is not my favourite place to be. “O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry. For a believer (and David certainly was a believer!) it is the hardest place to be, the hardest time to endure...the season of the terrible silence of God.

In my copy of the King James translation, immediately below the number of the Psalm, and before the dedication that is included even in the ancient texts in Hebrew, translated for us here, in that sandwich of space is a note by the translators to clue us into what we are about to read. This is what their note says: A prayer about a grievous complaint. What that means is that the translators working for King James back at the turn of the 1600's, as they translated this work into English to make it available to all the people, wanted to warn their readers...this is really serious stuff.

It takes us to the edge of the precipice of doubt. “May my prayer come before you.” There is no conviction about the certainty of that statement. It belongs to the category of “God, are you there? If you are I hope you are listening.” And yet it begins with such a marvelous confession of faith... “O Lord the God who saves me!” Are you confused? Here is the point Psalm 88 delivers with profound honesty. Confusion belongs to that season of the soul, when we experience the terrible silence of God. When we are in the midst of a crisis which causes us to feel...this is the opposite of the mountain top experience where God is so obviously present.

Psalm 88 delivers another profound insight into the nature of our minds and our souls. You really need to remember this. It is important. Doubt can only be present, in the experience of someone who believes. In fact that is so important I am going to say it again. Doubt can only be present as part of the experience of one who believes. "O Lord, the God who saves me, (that is conviction)...May my prayer come before you...(that is doubt with a capital D). In crises, this happens to us. When God seems to us to be silent, we assume HE must be distant. We inherited that assumption from a long line of believers that runs all the way back to King David of Israel.

And I will share a secret with you. Psalm 88 is not my favourite Psalm for one reason. I need it's message. It is strong medicine. And frankly I do not like strong medicine. My pride gets in the way. I do not like to believe, I am that needy. Apparently it is really important that believers understand, that disciples of Jesus be aware and see clearly...faith and doubt are related. Doubt is a problem that only besets those who have strong convictions about the nature and realities associated with following the God who is at one and the same time...Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer and Friend.

So here we are. Believers. Some of us have doubts. Many of us will taste that bitter pill before we are done with life. And we are considering what selected portions of the Book of Psalms teach us about prayer. The first lesson of Psalm 88 is that it happens, this season of the terrible silence of God. I keep saying prayer is a relationship. Well it gets hard to bare, when talking to God seems to result in...nothing...and there seems to be, no reply. David is at pains to make the point he is in serious trouble....verse 3... "My soul

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is full of trouble, and my life draws near the grave.” Lord, I am dying here! I need help, I need answers and I need them...like yesterday.

Acknowledging all of that I have made a list of questions, a check list if you will, to try and help wade my way through the season of the terrible silence of God. First one is this: have I requested the right thing. We know we are supposed to ask God to help us. We know that the promise of Jesus is ask and it shall be given, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened. In fact, on this matter of asking Jesus said, if a child asks his father for bread, will he give him a stone? And the answer Jesus said is..of course not! And if weak and sinful fathers know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more will that be the case if we ask God for what we need. So.... have I requested the right thing?

Is the reason that God is silent, in fact the reality that I have asked for a sword when what I need is a word or a deed that will make peace between myself and those who are causing me difficulty. Am I asking for the right thing? There is something good in visiting that question. Hear me on this. The question assumes the problem is not with God but with...me. In moments of desperation that may not be something you and I find attractive. But it also may cast more light on the situation than demanding God arrive with a legion or at least 2 angels to deliver us out of our pain and problems. Am I asking for the right thing?

Question number 2. Am I asking for something that is contrary to God's nature? HE is good. Am I asking HIM to do something that even I in my saner moments would recognize is bad? Like...destroy the person I perceive to be the cause of my troubles.

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Probably not going to happen. At least not on my timetable.
Because I am not God and HE is.

You know I really enjoy a good James Bond movie. If you remember back to when Sean Connery was the actor who brought us Bond, you will remember he drove a marvelous car. He could push a button and it would throw flame out the back to incinerate those who were pursuing him. He could push another button and side panels on the car's body would drop down and twin machine guns would hinge out and fire so that the car was suddenly transformed into something like a Spitfire aircraft to strafe the enemy before him. He could push a button and eject the threatening person who occupied the passenger seat, or he could engage a set of controls that would allow him to attack like an F-16 fighter jet, launching surface to surface rockets. I have often envied James Bond when I was driving on the 401 and forced to share it with flocks of other drivers. I have driven Volvos, Pontiacs, Fords, my Masda pick up, and my Toyota van. Benign, every one of them. God is not going to supply me with weapons of destruction no matter how pationately I ask for them. Because I cannot be trusted, given my sinful nature to use them wisely, or even courageously.

Here is a 3rd question to ask yourself in the season of the terrible silence of God. Have I done my part? Did you ever sit an exam during your school days and ask God to give you the answers to the questions, when you did not study, knowing what was awaiting you in classrom 201? Did you ever want to lose weight, and want to lose weight while enjoying persians and butter tarts. Butter tarts you know about. A persian is a Thunder Bay treat, a cinamon bun, with strawberry flavoured icing. If you are ever in Thunder Bay you need to try a persian. But they are incompatible with the concept

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of weight loss. I know. Or how about this one. I want to physically fit...I just do not want to sweat. No..... probably not going to work, unless I do my part, walking, running or visiting a gym.

A 4th question: Have God and I been speaking regularly. Prayer is a relationship. It is an intimate relationship. And if I neglect it, I can expect things to go wrong. Not because God is vengeful and judgemental, but because I can stumble over my own feet in the dark. Did that recently. Turned out the lights, turned around and tripped over something that has always been in that very spot. So often the trouble lies right here. Forgive me Lord, for thinking even for a moment that it could be otherwise.

And one final question. In the request I have made, does it give God the glory, or does it assume that I am really the important one who should be attended to, and who should receive a little more praise, or at least a little more attention?

I am not forgetting that there are moments in time in which we are blindsided by people and circumstances and are the victims of someone else's evil plan. Sin also resides in the lives of people other than myself. And Satan does move about the landscape like a raging lion seeking whom he may devour. But my experience tells me that most often those are circumstances when God is not silent, in fact when it is obvious to me that HE is very near, ever present and strong to save.

There is also one more set of facts we need to remember. We are mortal. Much as we might think we like the idea, we are not going to live forever. Eternity, and eternal life are part of the scheme of existence. And the cross and the open tomb proclaim

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that even in death and dying, by the grace of God, we who believe become winners, receiving the priceless prize of entering into the Lord's own precious presence.

In the meantime...faith is a reality and so is doubt. The mountain top experience of basking in the love of God is real. And so is the experience of Psalm 88. The isolation and desparation so well described in this Psalm is best treated by returning to the words with which David began. "O Lord, the God who saves me." They are words that take us to Calvary where we may cling to the cross and the Saviour who redeems us by dying that we might live and have eternal life. If there is an antidote for the terrible silence of God surely it is this faithful cry...O Lord, the God who saves me. Amen.

Let us pray;

Lord Jesus, our minds like our souls are wondrous. And yet we can fill the mind with questions we cannot answer, and trouble the soul by thinking on those things. In times when we seem to be unable to feel your love or satisfy the need in ourselves to be certain of your love help us to turn yet again to priceless fundamentals....the reality that you are the living God and that you have not only saved us in perilous circumstances, but once and for all from our sins and our sinfulness. We praise you Lord Jesus, for the Gospel truth that claims us forever and beyond. Amen