

1-1-1996

The Saddest Psalm in the Psalter

Tony Ash
tony.ash@acu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ash, Tony (2012) "The Saddest Psalm in the Psalter," *Leaven*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol4/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

The Saddest Psalm in the Psalter

by Tony Ash

Several years ago the institution where I teach revised its basic Bible curriculum. One effect was to give more attention to the Old Testament. Another was to send those of us who taught into previously unexplored areas, including, in my case, the Psalms. I knew a few psalms, like 23, 100 and 51, as most of us do. Others I knew “by accident,” such as 148, which is the text from which the song “Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah” comes. I also was familiar with scattered verses which I had heard over the years. Most of these snippets, I think, were from psalms, though I was not entirely sure in each case.

Consequently, my teaching demanded that I make a journey into the Psalter, never before attempted, except for a quick read-through when I was trying to read the entire Bible in one year. I think I assumed that I was in for a lot of “praise the Lords.” So it was a happy experience to find out how varied and provocative this collection is.

In my journey I often sat beside people who were experiencing the most terrible of agonies, and who, in their pain, felt abandoned by God (22, 39, 44). I was able to listen to the grateful shouts of others whose prayers had been answered and who were bursting with gratitude (30). I listened to the moans of authors deeply convicted of their sins (51). I marveled with those who contemplated nature with wide-eyed wonder (8, 19). I was able to tremble with the author of Psalm 29 as he observed the fury of a storm, and then gloried in the peace of God beyond the storm.

I was able to enter by the doorway (1) which

challenged me to choose the way of life I would pursue: wickedness or virtue. Then I was able to exit to a magnificent orchestral anthem of praise to God (150). I was invited to a royal wedding and saw the bride beautifully garbed (45). I saw the fearsome coming of God to judge the wickedness of his covenant-breaking people (50). I also walked by the side of a doubter who almost lost his faith when it seemed that God no longer governed the world with a clear morality (73).

There were other delights. I learned of the folly of trusting in wealth (49). In Psalm 63 I found beautiful images of absolute trust in God. In Psalm 16, which came to have an important place in Christian preaching, I gained insight into the “practice of the presence of God.”

But in this remarkable journey I came upon a barrier, which I found nearly impossible to surmount. It was the Eighty-eighth Psalm. I should have been warned by someone who had dubbed it “the saddest psalm in the Psalter” and by another note that indicated it was the only psalm that contained no ray of hope. True, it did speak of the loving kindness of God, as well as of his virtues. But none of this was available, so the psalmist said, to him.

Some years later, in a church where it was the custom to read through the Bible consecutively in the movement through the worship meetings, the reader came to the time for reading Psalm 88. He dutifully did so, just before I was to deliver a sermon. But he added a codicil, just as I ascended the pulpit. “I wish someone would tell me what this means,” he

This is God's way of saying to suf- fering humans that he knows what they are going through.

said. That was exactly how I felt when first meeting this text.

I spoke to a colleague about my perplexity about this poem. What could it possibly have that is of value for a believer? He replied that he had preached on every psalm, including Psalm 88, and in a few days produced for me a sermon outline. Those notes began to crack the door open a bit; a small opening that was to become wider with the years.

Perhaps your curiosity is piqued by now to turn to this scripture. It could have been written by Job. It is filled with the language of death. In fact, it uses more synonyms for death than any other biblical text. The author has not experienced physical death, but uses this image, as do many psalmists, to indicate that matters have become as bad as it is possible for them to get. He makes it clear that God was responsible for his suffering ("your wrath lies heavy upon me"). He has been shunned by his friends because they find him such a horror. He claims that suffering has been his lot from his youth onward.

When one who is familiar with psalms of this type reads this depressing poem he expects to have just a word of hope at the end. Psalms of lamentations always do, either at the end or somewhere in the body. But not this one. It carries the reader into the depths and then drops him without any kind of optimistic affirmation.

This psalm of complaint is not the only one that protests to God out of suffering. Approximately one-third of the psalms are of this type—frequently called lamentations. Most of them come from an individual, though ten or so reflect the woes of the nation. But all of them, except Psalm 88, have some word that either expresses hope that God will respond, or reflects on the fact that he has heard and answered.

So what are we to do with this scripture? A first question might be to ask why it is in the Bible at all. Why did the collectors of the Psalter include it? Why did God in his oversight of the collection so guide them? I believe this is God's way of saying to suffering humans that he knows what they are going through. It is tempting, as many psalmists have asserted, to feel that God is uncaring and absent in times of deep suffering and despair. He does not understand. If he does not understand, dealing with human problems seems of no interest to him. But the inclusion of this psalm shows that the opposite is true. He even takes the "risk" of presenting us with a "hopeless" poem to show that he knows that sometimes the human situation seems completely defeating. This is not a God who always sees his children bubbly and joyous. This is a God who tells his children he knows that life is sometimes the very pits. Any reader who comes to Psalm 88 and finds his own life described there can say, in his pain, that he knows that God knows. Suffering is terrible in any event, but it is of a different character if we know our Creator and Sovereign recognizes that such situations do occur. This places the agonies in a different category. We may still say, "Why doesn't he do something," but we can no longer say, "He doesn't know or want us to know he knows."

I wonder what this psalmist might have said a month, or a year, after penning these morose words? Would he have added the positive note missing here? Perhaps so. It may be that some other psalm was also one he composed, on a day when his prospects were brighter. But even if not, his words carry a significant message to his fellow sufferers in similar pain: They are acknowledged on high.

Let us take another approach. If we were counseling a person like this poet, our advice might well be to call him to prayer. But we would be informed by the sufferer that his prayers are unremitting. Thrice (1f, 9 and 13f) the author speaks of his prayers, coming at morning, day, and night. Additionally, the entire psalm is a prayer, but no relief has come. Here is a powerful statement about faith. We have often seen those who are embittered by life's woeful circumstances rail against God and abandon him. This writer does not. Even with his agonies, which are God-imposed (7, 16), he continues to trust. This is not "good-time" faith. This is trust when every reason not to trust seems present. This author has made a commitment to God which will not be turned aside, whatever his fortunes. He might well reply if asked, "Where else would I go?" And in his continued faith and prayer he conveys a powerful message to those whose lives are tortured by sickness, reverses, destroyed relationships or death. He

says, across the centuries, “I can continue to trust, and so can you.” It is a powerful message, which can be fully appreciated only if one comes into the same room of pain that the author has inhabited.

Finally, no other biblical text brings us so close to the grave. If one examines verses 3-7 and 10-12, a host of synonyms for death are discovered. Half of the psalm is concerned with the verge of death. If, as we have said, death represents things being as bad as they can possibly be, then there are many experiences which we might call “death knocking at the door.” Circumstances, attitudes, relationships, failures of all sorts, mental aberrations, disappointments, drudgery—on and on, would all qualify. Everyone could make his own list. And everyone has a list. In fact, life’s story could be written as our attempts to escape these “near death” experiences. And this is not to mention how desperately humans try to avoid the final cessation of life. It seems to me this psalmist shares two assumptions with the modern experience. One is that this life is all the author has. The second is that this life is a “bummer.” These recognitions certainly cast a pall over all we are and do. It is at this point that we could wish a mighty hero would burst on the scene and inform us that he wields the power to overcome death, thereby giving us power to overcome all the near death experiences.

Thus, the psalm has brought us to the grave and despair. Perhaps no scripture does so more vividly. It exposes us to hopelessness so that we can taste that bitter draught. But in so doing it is a mighty preparation for the Gospel. For the gospel story is that such a hero *has* appeared. By going into

death’s realm, he crushed it and emerged victorious. Jesus, the Christ, has been raised. And he brings a host with him. The psalmist’s view was not long enough. This life is not all there is. And this life, even with the horrors that sometimes fill it, can be transformed. For resurrection is not only a reality at the end of life; it is a burning hope that works backwards and transforms what, in time, goes before. That is why Christian sufferers, enduring pains that most of us cannot imagine, still remain filled with joy and optimism. Their greater hope colors all their earthly existence and gives them the ability to praise even while they moan. They may say, in their times of greatest anguish, that they are unknown and uncared for. But they know that is a lie. The resurrection hope comes sweeping in, and again they know joy even as Jesus, to our amazement, could be said to endure the cross and the shame because of the joy that was set before him.

I no longer face a rock wall when this psalm comes into view. True, every time I read it I still feel that something else needs to be said. But I understand that it conveys powerful lessons that need to be heard, and that can sustain when the terrible days come. It no longer interests me just as a matter of academic concern. It speaks to me powerfully in my own life and has often had a transforming experience when the “here and now” have seemed impossible. I suspect that this is what God wants it to do.

Tony Ash teaches Scripture in the School of Biblical Studies of Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.