

Psalm 88: A Meditation on Human Potential
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There is the shadow of futility in this psalm, verses 10-12. Yet there is a measure of resistance to this sense of despair and futility (13-18.) For the psalmist, it is past time for God to act to save. God has not rectified the situation. According to verse 1 and verse 13, the author is counting on a non-natural solution. There is the apparent temptation to allow circumstance to act as a measuring stick for the Word of God. The psalmist wants to measure the situation by the Word of God. But time has passed, things are getting worse, personal resources are disappearing, and faith can be called into question.

In the first two verses, the writer made a commitment. He has committed himself to the idea, to the belief, that God will save him. He does not try to save himself. Here is the psalmist's personal assessment of the situation:

- His soul is full of trouble (v. 3.)
- Death is near (v.3)
- He is without strength (v. 4.)
- He feels himself separate from God (v. 5)
- He is the lowest pit (v.6.) -- but it is God who put him there.
- He feels the wrath of God (v. 7). God is overwhelming him.
- He has lost friends (v. 8) -- God has taken them away.
- He is despised (v. 8)
- He is burdened by grief (v. 9)
- God's wrath has swept over him (v. 16)
- God has taken his loved ones and companions from him (v. 18)

The psalmist is questioning his relationship to God, and God's relationship to him. "Why do you reject me?" Why do you hide your face from me?" (v. 14.)

This writer labors under an assumption that he treats as knowledge. The assumption is that God is behind all that is happening to him. Therefore, he is not a victim of circumstance. This is not a matter of coincidence. This has not happened just because he is on the earth and in time. He even believes that God is causal. Everything else is mere effect.

The writer is trying to comprehend four foci of relationships:

God ----> revelation.

God ----> man

God ----> circumstance

God ----> faith

It appears that he is trying to explain to himself and to us the readers why he still believes. There is the operative word, "help" in verse 13. He doesn't think he's getting any help. The psalmist believes that God is supremely real, and not an abstraction -- verse 15 speaks of "suffering" God's terrors. Verse 16-- "your wrath swept over me." Also verse 16, "your terrors have destroyed me. Verse 17 -- "engulfed me completely."

The psalmist's idea is that it is past time for God to act. God's idea is, it is not yet time to act. The psalmist asks the question, "when will you act, after it is too late?"

He asks these supporting questions:

- Show wonders to the dead? (v. 10)
- The dead rise and praise you? (v. 10)
- Love declared in the grave? (v. 11)
- Faithfulness in destruction? (v. 11)
- Wonders known in the place of darkness? (v. 12)
- The dead and oblivion (v. 12)

He has no explanation of why God has not acted to change the situation. So why does the psalmist continue to pray?

- Day and night I cry out (v. 1)
- Prayer comes before you (v. 2)
- Call to you every day (v. 9)
- I spread out my hands (v. 9)
- Cry to you for help (v. 13)
- In the morning my prayer comes to you (v.13)

The psalmist prays as if God were his one and only resource. He does not think that his circumstance is a natural situation. He sees it as non-natural:

- You have put me in the lowest pit (v. 6)
- Your wrath lies upon me (v. 7)
- You have overwhelmed me with your waves (v. 7)
- You have taken me from my friends (v. 8)
- You have made me repulsive (v. 8)
- You have confined me and I cannot escape (v. 8)
- Your terrors (v 7)
- Wrath swept over me (v. 16)

- Your terrors have destroyed me (v. 16)
- You have taken my companions and loved ones from me (v. 18)

To the psalmist, there is nothing natural about this situation, which God is orchestrating. Therefore, the man is helpless.

The psalmist is primarily overwhelmed by God, and only secondarily overwhelmed by the situation. This suggests that as a consequence, the circumstantial is an extension of, or a function of, the will of God. Therefore, his suffering is a function of God. The psalmist feels that his suffering has reached terminal proportions.

The writer wants a change:

- Save me (v.1)
- Turn your ear to my cry (v. 2)
- Show your wonders (v. 10)
- Love declared (v. 11)
- Faithfulness (v. 11)
- Wonders known (v. 12)
- Righteous deeds (v.12)
- Help (v. 13.)

But despite all his pleas, all is static! He cannot understand the lack of eternal response. His perception is that eternal power sets the temporal circumstance.

He uses the idea of darkness four times:

- v. 6 “the darkest depth”
- v. 9 “dim with grief”
- v. 12 “place of darkness”
- v. 18 “darkness, my closest friend”

This is a tortured mind. His mind is not twisted nor distorted nor is it sick. The psalmist’s mind is rather, tortured or severely stressed. Therefore, it is the reality of God against this human mind. God is stressing his mind. This is an important point.

God ----> causes the circumstance---->stresses mind and body.

The thought world is under great stress. Therefore, language is under great stress. Eternal reality ----> stresses temporal reality (mind, body, circumstance).

What we have here is a picture of the discourse of stress. It is composed of at least eight parts:

- The reality of God. The stress starts in heaven. Causal, and therefore solutional. And because of that, the character of God can come into question.
- The materiality --- the material circumstance. Oppressive/overwhelming. Includes the body. Suffering, loss.
- The human mind-- the immaterial. Stress, full of questions, trying to comprehend, finding a wall.
- Time. This has gone on a long time, and it seems to be running out.
- Prayer -- the relational.
- Language, through which he expresses his sense of things.
- The waiting. He is waiting for resolution.
- Experience of no human help.

This discourse is also the discourse of distress. It is at least a human reaction and certainly a believer's reaction. The psalmist is not able to pull all eight parts together and get coherence. There is no coherence. The discourse itself must be a burden.

He feels abandoned by heaven -- v. 5 -- "you remember me no more," and "cut off from your care." All of this beyond his grasp to understand or to make coherent. There is no organizing rule, nor any organizing principle that will allow him to put it together. The psalmist is depressed.

Question: Is the discourse of distress the same as the discourse of depression?

- The discourse of distress is not un-faith or disbelief.
- The discourse of distress is not hopelessness, for he believes in "the God who saves me" (v. 1)

- The discourse of distress cannot wholly fit God into the picture, nor circumstance into the picture. It is not resignation to events, and it is not a reversal of Biblical reality.

If you could visual the eternal aspect of reality as a three-sided box, you can choose to put circumstance in that box. The eternal still controls circumstance – even while He doesn't (at least in this circumstance)reverse the reality of the events.

But there is a question: Is the discourse of distress a precursor to disillusionment? He searches for the greater and higher meaning. That meaning is not inherent in the situation: Therefore, meaning is external to the situation.

It appears that the greater and higher meaning is being withheld. The situation yet worsens and continues. It seems clear that at one time the psalmist started with meaning, but he wonders now. So the discourse of distress is about what happens when the circumstance outruns the meaning, or when eternal meaning lags behind the situation.

If this could be illustrated, it would be with two arrows, one above the other, staggered. The upper left would represent meaning/purpose, pointing to the right. Lower arrow below and to the right, also pointing right, is the situation.

We could connect them both with the label, and write vertically “the discourse of distress.”

The psalmist exists and lives in a “one piece” universe or reality:

Eternal reality ----> circumstance (function of God) ----> mind.

It stands to reason that his thinking should also be a function of God.

Or: God ----> mind ----> circumstance?

We can observe that his mind is between God and the circumstance.

“Oh Lord, the God that saves me “(v.1). Thus the discourse of distress is between God and circumstance.

The discourse of distress is not a coping measure. It is an inclusive discourse, because it includes the invisible world, on the invisible world's terms. It does not

fragment reality, separating God from the material world.

One supposes that the discourse of distress is consistent with a “whole” mind. There is a question: Is the discourse of distress a healthy response? How?

The psalmist infers that only God can end the discourse of distress. So the discourse of distress is a troublesome condition of mind, that cannot be envied nor can it be remedied by anything human. There is no human cure; individual nor collective. The answer nor cure is itself non-natural.

Therefore, the discourse of distress is a sign that we have crossed the threshold beyond human solution, recourse, and answer. It is possible, then that the discourse of distress is to be grasped as a complete sign/symbol itself.

graphic:

human actualization	(gulf here)	
human potential	discourse of distress	(here you go beyond it.)
human recourse		Nothing and one else but God

This is the point of no return. The discourse of distress is a sign or a symbol of the true distinction between God and man.

God	(gulf)	man
	discourse of distress	nothing human can help

Such a person stands between two horizons in which God is “the singular Hope.”

The discourse of distress shows that God has robbed you of any hope for any kind of human resolution. This is reminiscent of the desert of Sinai experience.

Could this be the last stage of faith? Because what comes next, is either vindication or disillusionment.

The psalmist is helpless: “I am confined and cannot escape, my eyes are dim with grief” (v. 8).

However, it is unthinkable that God should fail the demands of faith.