

Psalm 88: On the edge of death



Psalm 88 (87) (Mode 2. 5....31 / 4.....32)

A cry from one who is about to die (compare Psalm 39; Isaiah 38; Job 10). Shunned by friend and foe, and feeling utterly deserted by God, the psalmist is desperate.

Note the absence of any confession of sin. There is no promise of thanks. The psalmist holds little hope that his prayer will be answered favourably and that he will escape the clutches of death. Since death is the destiny of all, and since it is not the work of some rival God, he wonders if the final revelation of God is one of anger, chaos, fire and terror?

O Lord, my God,
by day I plead for your help,
by night, I cry out in your presence.
Let my prayer reach you; heed my cry.

I am steeped in trouble,
on the brink of the grave.

I am numbered among those
who go down to the pit.

My time is up and I am left to die,
like the slain that lie in the field,
like those you remember no more,
for they are cut off from you forever.

Though nothing can be done to save his life, the psalmist will die with prayer on his lips to this God whom he cannot understand.

You have lowered me into the pit,
into the darkness of the Abyss.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
wave after wave overwhelms me.

You have caused my companions to shun me;
for them you have made me a thing of horror.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
my eyes are sunken with grief.

According to his understanding, God controls all that happens, and so sees God as the one responsible for the situation in which he finds himself.

‘Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends,
for the hand of God has touched me!’(Job 19:21).

All day long I call on you, Lord,
straining my hands towards you.
Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do they rise up to praise you?

Is your love known in the grave,
or your faithfulness among the dead?
Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your saving help in the land of oblivion?

[destruction]

He reminds God of how he is always praying.
He reminds God also of the futility of death,
since he will no longer be able to give glory to God.
Why, then, does God want him to die?

What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?’(Psalm 30:9).

‘In death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise? I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping’(Psalm 6:5-6).

‘The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence’(Psalm 115:17).

‘Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness’(Isaiah 38:18).

‘Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades in place of the living who give thanks? From the dead, as from one who does not exist, thanksgiving has ceased’(Sirach 17:27-28).

Lord, I cry to you for help;
in the morning my plea comes before you.

Lord, why do you cast me off?

Why do you hide your face?

I have been wretched and sickly since my youth.

I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.

They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.

You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me;
my only companion is darkness.

‘My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me’(Psalm 55:4-5).

‘Withdraw your hand far from me,
and do not let dread of you terrify me’(Job 13:21).

‘Heavy night was spread over them, an image of the darkness that was destined to receive them; but still heavier than darkness were they to themselves’(Wisdom 17:21).

‘Christ suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit’(1Peter 3:18)

‘When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

‘Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?’(1Corinthians 15:54-55)