

Embracing The Silent God: Theological Implications of Psalm 88 for Pastoral Care

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The purpose of this study is to explain the theological implications of Psalm 88 for Pastoral Care. The study delves deeply into the conditions presented in Psalm 88, which poignantly describes the deplorable conditions of imminent death. Through an analysis and interpretation of the text, the expressive language used by the psalmists reveals the depth of their suffering and the reality of death. The phrases "my life draws nearer to Sheol" and "among the dead" are used to explore parallels between lamentations in Psalm 88 and the experience of someone in a dying condition. This study also shows the need for pastoral care in providing spiritual guidance to those who seek to "embrace" God at the time of death. Through descriptive qualitative research grounded in an extensive literature study, this article seeks to explain the important role of pastoral care in offering support for dying people.

Keywords: Psalm 88, Embracing God, Dying, Pastoral care.

Introduction

Psalm 88 describes the psalmist's sorrowful cry in searching for God who dwells in silence. When confronted with the realities of mortality, the psalmist maintained his firm conviction to meet God even in silence.¹ What is described in Psalm 88 is a different depiction of God. His response is different from the common view of the God of Israel. In the conventional understanding of faith, God is always portrayed in the perception of God actively providing salvation and help to His people. However, what is written in Psalm 88 looks the opposite. Psalm 88 is arguably the saddest of all the Psalms. God's silence provides the most painful picture, which the Psalmist is trying to express. Not a few believers stand in a long struggle that sometimes cannot be seen where it will end.

¹ Leonard P. Mare, "Facing the Deepest Darkness of Despair and Abandonment: Psalm 88 and the Life of Faith," *Old Testament Essay* 27(1) (2014), 177.

Meanwhile, God seemed to choose to silently watch the struggle.²

Psalm 88 also shows the relevance of the condition of a person who is dying especially because of an incurable disease. Such conditions have a profound impact in the form of anxiety, fear, and depression that significantly worsen the spiritual state. Another bad condition arises in the form of feelings of despair and disappointment as if living in darkness and separated from God.³

This library research aims to explain the correlation between the depiction of lamentation in Psalm 88 and the life experiences of people who are dying due to incurable disease conditions. By exploring and interpreting Psalm 88 and juxtaposing it with reality related to the condition of someone who is dying, this study aims to explain the relevance of the text in understanding the experience of those who are dying.

Discussion

The Structure of Psalm 88

Although Psalm 88 is included in the Lamentations Psalms, its structure is different from the typical Lamentations Psalm.⁴ The struggle seems to continue and the Psalmist describes it as having no solution or answer to the problem. The following is the structure of Psalm 88:

First, the opening. This section consists of verses 1 and 2. This passage indicates

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of The Psalms, A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 78.

³ Allen Shelly, *Spiritual Care: A Guide for Caregivers*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 26.

⁴ C. Hassel Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Michigan: Baker Academy, 2018), 197-198.

the address (to whom this Psalm is addressed). In addition, this passage also shows some information such as under what conditions this Psalm is delivered. Words like 'cry out' and 'weep me,' indicate that the psalmist felt deep misery or sorrow.⁵ *Second*, trouble. This section includes verses 3-5. Statements of distress and grief are clearly stated as part of the problem. More specifically, Hassel sees that this problem refers to the possibility of physical illness and spiritual suffering. The psalmist uses words such as 'troubled', 'my life is drawing nearer to *Sheol*', and 'among the dead' to indicate dying. *Third*, the first complaint against God. This section consists of verses 6-12. However, verses 6-9 have a slightly different tendency than verses 10-12. In verses 6-9, the psalmist tries to continue his conversation. The previously stated issues do not seem to have received a response. Therefore, in this passage, the psalmist seems to put God as the cause of all suffering, or at least he sees that God allows this suffering to happen to him. However, it seems that God still chooses to remain silent. On the other hand, verses 10-12 are expressed by Brueggemann as a dramatic effect in response to God's silence. The psalmist began to question the relationship between God's reign and death. *Fourth*, the second complaint against God. This section includes verses 13-18. In this passage, the Psalmist clearly expresses the most severe form of suffering and depression experienced by him through his complaints. This is indicated by the questions, 'Why did you throw me away?' and 'Why did you hide your face from me?' Questions that show feelings of abandonment. That's why if God doesn't act immediately, the psalmist knows that he will only embrace 'darkness', as the final word that closes this psalm.⁶

Historical Background of Psalm 88

⁵ C. Hassel Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*, (Michigan: Baker Academy), 202-203.

⁶ Brueggemann, Walter. *Spirituality of the Psalms*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,) 46-57

In general, Psalm 88 is associated with the *Korahites*. *Korah* was the great-grandson of Levi and, the leader of the rebellion against Moses and Aaron. Numbers 16 speaks of how he was swallowed by a gaping hole in the earth. His sons were saved (Numbers 26:11). The Psalms of Korah come from the sons of Korah. They were also important supporters of David (1Chr. 12:6). this also explains why there are so many uses of the word 'Yahweh' (referring to Yahwist) in this Psalm.⁷ In addition, there is also Herman's name, The *Ezrahite*. Some records also indicate that this name was also affiliated with the Kora people. The men of Ezrahi refer to the wise man (1 Kings 4:31). This is further emphasized by the word 'mask' in the first line refers to 'artistic song' or 'didactic song' which is derived from the verb 'to be wise or skillful'. Although this Psalm seems to imply a close connection with the Davidic dynasty, the account of the possible editorial process cannot be ignored either.⁸

Hassel notes the possibility of editing in the third book of the early exilic era, which is reflected in Psalm 89 (the last part of book 3). This shows the crisis that occurred at the end of the Davidic dynasty, 586 BC. Based on the records listed above, the difficulty of determining the historical background of Psalm 88 is inevitable. This can be caused by the editorial process as well as by the genre. However, Individual lamentation is more personal and it is difficult to find context if it is a personal matter.⁹

Interpretation

Verses 1-2, "O Lord the God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry before You, let my prayer come before You; lean your ears to my cries." The first verse begins with an

⁷ Kraus, Hans. J. *Theology of The Psalms*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 165

⁸ Seybold, Klaus. *Introducing The Psalms*. (London: T&T Clark), 116

⁹ C. Hassel Bullock, *Encountering the Book Of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*, (Michigan: Baker Academy), 204-205

acknowledgment that this psalm is addressed to God, the psalmist's source of salvation. According to Brueggemann, this indicates the presence of intimacy. This intimacy can be built from experience. The psalmist may have sensed God's salvation, so he could have stated that clause. The phrase 'God of my salvation' also indicates the psalmist's perception as well as his hope in God. These perceptions and expectations became the yardstick by which the psalmist complained, wept, and even questioned the things listed in the following verses.¹⁰

Verses 3-5, "For my soul is full of trouble, and my life draws nearer to *Sheol*. I was among those who descended into the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like those who are left among the dead, like the murdered who lie in the grave, like those whom You no longer remember, because they are cut off from Your hands."¹¹ The problems that the psalmist speaks of seem to relate to things close to death. Words like 'troubled', 'my life are getting closer to *Sheol*', 'down to the Hole', and 'among the dead' are clear markers. This condition shows the reason why the Psalmist spoke to God actively.¹²

Verses 6-9, "You have placed me in the depths of the Pit, in dark and deep areas. Your wrath weighed on me, and You flooded me with all Your waves. You have caused my friends to avoid me; You have made me into something terrible for them. I was locked up so that I could not escape; My eyes became dim with sadness. Every day I cry unto Thee, O Lord; I extend my hand to You." In this passage, the psalmist seems to be increasingly discouraged. The Lord did not respond to the call made in the previous section. God chose silence. Then, the bid was raised. God was held responsible for what

¹⁰ Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of The Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House), 77-78

¹¹ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part 2 and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 141

¹² Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 395.

happened to the psalmist. This can be seen as an active effort to pressure God to respond immediately. The psalmist did not respond to God's silence in the same way. She chose to actively voice what she felt while showing God that she needed God and needed answers from God.¹³

Verses 10-12, "Do you perform miracles for the dead? Do the spirits of the dead rise to praise You? Is Your steadfast love revealed in the tomb or Your faithfulness in the place of destruction? Is Your miracle known in darkness or Your saving aid in the land of all forgetfulness? Brueggemann sees those verses as questions about God's capacity to work in His sovereign way in death. In the psalmist's view, God is not a God who acts in death. If God wants to act, then that action must be manifested in life. It refers to the Israeli cosmology of life and death.¹⁴

Verses 13-15, "But I, O Lord, call upon Thee; In the morning my prayer comes before You. Oh Lord, why did You cast me out? Why do You hide Your face from me? Wretched and near death from my youth, I suffer the horrors of Thee; I'm desperate." The rising intonation seems to be getting muffled. The psalmist is just trying to show an expression of deep sadness in this passage. After taking various actions to urge God, God chose to remain silent. In the end, the feeling that arises is the feeling of abandonment. Perhaps, this is more painful than the problems faced by the psalmist. It is also possible that this neglect will add to his wailing. God, the only one she believed to be her savior, seemed to let her face everything 'alone'.¹⁵

Verses 16-18, "Your wrath has struck me; Your fear attack destroyed me. They surrounded me like a flood all day; From all sides, they approached me. You have caused

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 11-13

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of The Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, (Augsburg Publishing House), 78-81

¹⁵ Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message* (Augsburg: Fortress), p.11-13.

friends and neighbors to avoid me; My friends are in the dark." These verses are the last part. However, it seems like an unsatisfactory ending. The struggle continues without certainty. Even so, the psalmist still tried to wait for God's answer. Brueggemann highlighted the word 'darkness' as a closing. This can be interpreted as the only thing left if God does not save. However, this word is also a sign that he is still waiting. It may also imply a belief that God may not allow him to experience darkness.¹⁶

Understanding Psalm 88 in a Pastoral Perspective

➤ The Theological Implications of Psalm 88

Claus Westermann argues that lamentation psalms, whether offered by individuals or communities, have similarities in their composition, characterized by the presence of petitions addressed to God.¹⁷ Hans-Joachim Kraus argues that the petitioner described in the psalm is a lament of a man who is terminally ill and nearing death. It is plausible that the applicant had a chronic illness from a young age and existed as an outcast living outside the city gates.¹⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger cleverly highlight the dire circumstances in which the psalmist faced the threat of imminent death.¹⁹ Psalm 88 also describes the response of God's people to their suffering through expressions of lamentation. This lamentation is prevalent in both the Old and New Testaments, appearing as a typical reaction when individuals face life's challenges. Lamentation is an integral aspect of faith in God during times of suffering, based on the conviction that God will attentively listen

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of The Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, (Augsburg Publishing) 80.

¹⁷ Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content & Message* (Augsburg: Fortress), 11-13.

¹⁸ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Continental Commentaries* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 193.

¹⁹ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalm 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 391.

to His people.²⁰

Dominick D. Hankle highlights the advantages of using the Lamentation Psalm as a suitable mechanism for expressing and coping with a wide array of negative emotions that include anger, resentment, frustration, despair, and despair.²¹ Psalm 88 can be interpreted as a depiction of the suffering of God's people facing the reality of impending death. The psalmist vividly describes a state of deep darkness similar to the experience of individuals facing terminal conditions. While the specific illness that afflicted the psalmist remains unspecified, he articulated a deep affinity with death.²²

Caroline Blyth's analysis reveals that while the specific illness that afflicted the psalmist is still unknown, indications point to chronic illness (as suggested in verse 16: "I was oppressed and a bringer of death from childhood"). Blyth draws attention to verses 9 and 19 ("You have turned my acquaintances away from me, You have made me an abomination to them"). Blyth's examination mainly focuses on the psalmist's struggles and lamentations, which bear a resemblance to the hardships and grievances faced by those nearing death.²³

This psalm reveals a voice overwhelmed by fear and desperately reaching out to a seemingly non-existent God. *Trying to embrace God, but God dwells in silence.* The psalmist found himself immersed in abandonment and despair, but his fiery cries remained. While God's silence continued, the psalmist's voice remained unyielding, constantly directing petitions to the emptiness of heaven. Even when faced with the stark

²⁰ Phillip C. Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow: A Pastoral Theology of Suffering* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 77.

²¹ Dominick D. Hankle, "The Therapeutic Implications of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Christian Counseling Setting," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 38(4) (2010), 275-280.

²² Colin B. Johnstone, "On Asking the Right Question." *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 35 (3) (1981), 173.

²³ Caroline Blyth, "I am Alone with My Sickness: Voicing the Experience of HIV-and AIDS-Related Stigma Through Psalm 88," *Colloquium*, 44(2) (2012), 149-152.

reality of death, the psalmist persevered in lamentation.²⁴

➤ **Understanding of Dying**

Dying is the condition of a person who is facing death. Death is a condition of cessation of breathing, pulse, and blood pressure, as well as loss of response to external stimuli, or cessation of heart, lung, and brain function permanently.²⁵

The concept of death encompasses various definitions across a variety of contexts. From the perspective of physics, R. Schulz categorizes death into three types: clinical death, brain death, and biological or cellular death.²⁶ Biblically, death is understood through the Hebrew term "mut," meaning 'to die,' and the Greek term "θάνατος" (*thanatos*), meaning 'death.' This is interpreted as a consequence of God's judgment after Adam's rebellion. Death signifies the separation of soul and body. The body is laid to rest through burial, while the soul is believed to undergo judgment, leading to eternal placement in heaven or hell.²⁷

Regarding death, Martin Heidegger said that human existence is "existence to death." According to Heidegger, death is the basic structure of life and represents an existence that is inherently embraced from birth.²⁸ Heidegger explained that human existence lies in the contemplation of all forms of existence.²⁹ Augustine, famous for his deep contemplation on the subject of death, suggested that the human ego would arise

²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Augsburg: Fortress, 1984), 78.

²⁵ Romanus Romas, Pendampingan Pastoral Orang Menjelang Ajal, *JURNAL SEPAKAT* Vol. 3, No. 2, Juni 2017, 186

²⁶ R. Schulz, *The Psychology of Death, Dying, and Bereavement* (London: Addison Wesley Publishing, 1978), 91

²⁷ Hyeon-suk Yoo, "The Assurance of Salvation and Social Care through the Fear of Death," *Theology and Praxis* 58(2018), 479-480. Recited.

²⁸ Kim, Seongmin. "Christian Consideration on the Problem of Death and Overcoming It." *Theology and Praxis*, 1(1997), 96-126.

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 147, Soonwon Hong, "Understanding Death and Clinical Ministry," *Theology and Praxis* 52(2015), 791. Recited.

when confronted with mortality because of death. Imminent death always forms the conditions for humans to live in a meaningful way.³⁰ According to Heidegger, human beings can escape from earthly limitations only when they are aware of the reality of death while running forward toward death. This perspective reflects diverse interpretations of death.³¹ Kübler-Ross writes, "No matter how prepared you are, everyone has a fear of death."³² Therefore, people try to overcome it by denying or avoiding death.

Several stages will be passed by everyone before death. These stages include Denial-Anger-Bargaining-Depression-and Acceptance.³³ The denial stage usually appears when a person realizes that the disease suffered will not be cured. Diagnosis of the disease usually also falls into this category because they know that the disease can be fatal for them. At this stage of denial, they have not been able to accept reality and think that their lives will be fine. The stages of anger will be seen by showing symptoms of rebellion in the statement "Why should I experience this condition". On the eve of death, man's ego will appear in the form of anger against God because God will take his life. The bargaining stage arises when they realize that things are not going to improve. This attitude arises because they think that God will help them, if they do something good, then God will restore their condition. But all efforts did not change the situation so they experienced stages of depression. This stage makes a person look at himself in the dark.

³⁰ Hyun-suk Yoo, "Collaborative Relationship between Psychology and Pastoral Counseling through the Understanding of Death: Focusing on the Perspective of Self-Realization in Psychology and Eschatology in Theology," *Theology and Praxis* 61(2018), 372.

³¹ Soonwon Hong, "Understanding Death and Clinical Ministry," *Theology and Praxis* 52(2015), 791.

³² Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 11.

³³ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 35-37

Usually at this stage, they will express disappointment at everything they have experienced. After experiencing severe depression, they will come to the stage of acceptance. At this stage, they will accept reality. Not trying to blame others or God for everything that happens to him. Even if death is coming soon, they will accept it. Subsequently, the stage of depression appears.³⁴ The last stage is the acceptance stage where at this stage honesty becomes very important. Honesty is to accept the fact that life is coming to an end, therefore they must be prepared to accept it with the conviction of faith.³⁵

➤ **The Urgency of Pastoral Care for People Who Are Dying**

Pastoral care is a valuable methodology for ministering to individuals who face suffering, upheaval, and multifaceted challenges that hinder their spiritual well-being. The concept of pastoral care denotes an Act that provides guidance and support to others in a pastoral capacity.³⁶ William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle suggest that one dimension of pastoral care includes actions taken by Christians aimed at providing support, guidance, and reconciliation to individuals grappling with confusion and despair.³⁷

Pastoral care deals with faith-based assistance, recognizing that human beings cannot be solely understood physically, because they consist of interconnected dimensions that cannot be separated. The human body includes physical, psychological, social, and religious-spiritual dimensions, all of which are interrelated. Therefore, when

³⁴ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 47-69

³⁵ Cho, Jae-guk. "A Christian Understanding of Human Life and Dignified Death." *Theology and Praxis* 24(2010), 143-181

³⁶ Aart Van Beek, *Pendampingan Pastoral* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2007), 9.

³⁷ William A. Clebsch dan Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (New York: Harper dan Row Publishers, 1967), 4.

a person experiences pain, it can reverberate in various dimensions. Faced with severe situations and crises, those nearing death often face significant upheaval in their lives, sometimes leading to questions regarding God's presence. People with terminal illnesses may find themselves grappling with the perceived absence of God. Intense pain often triggers feelings of anger toward God, leading to perceptions of God as cruel and unjust.³⁸ The provision of faith-based support to someone with terminal illness plays an important role in the process of sustaining them while suffering. Sustaining them does not include physical recovery but embracing the divine will and finding purpose and meaning in one's life.³⁹

On the other hand, pastoral care includes psychological healing efforts aimed at facilitating a person's encounter with God before facing death. In this context, two important functions of pastoral care are particularly relevant: sustaining and reconciling. A person who is grappling with irreversible conditions on the eve of his death needs strong support. On the other hand, the function of reconciliation is needed to guide him to an attitude of acceptance of imminent death. These functions of pastoral care are especially important when they answer the repeated questions that arise in such situations: Why is this happening? Where is God in the midst of this trial? Did God withdraw or remain silent? These questions often lead to feelings of disappointment, and anger, toward God. Faced with the inevitability of near-death and the inability to change circumstances, pastoral care aims to assist him in accepting the reality of impending death.⁴⁰

Pastoral care bears a deep responsibility as a response to a community of faith united by the sacrificial offering of Jesus Christ. This empathetic engagement requires a

³⁸ Santoso, P. H. *Pelayanan Kesehatan Yang holistic* (Yogyakarta: Pusat Pastoral, 1997), 65.

³⁹ Jakob Beate, Erlinda Snturias, and Benn Christoph, *Penyembuhan yang mengutuhkan* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2003), 78.

⁴⁰ Robinson Simanungkalit, "HIV/AIDS Sebagai "Ruang" Pelayanan Pastoral Gereja," *Jurnal Christian Humaniora* 3(1) (2019), 41-43.

true understanding of their emotions and suffering in the face of mortality and actively responding to the imminent reality of death. As communities collectively seek to assuage the fear associated with death, it becomes important to engage sincerely and facilitate the transformation of these experiences into acts of faith.⁴¹

Conclusion

Psalm 88 is best applied to believers who are going through a long and stifling struggle (such as someone who has a terminal illness). Understanding this psalm from a pastoral perspective can also serve as a companion who can give strength to remain steadfast in reaching out to (embracing) God actively, even though God sometimes seems silent. Prayers must not stop being said and requests must continue to be raised. Sometimes urging God is a unique way to show that God is so precious that no one can replace Him. It is also a way of saying that He is the source of life and help. Psalm 88 can also be used to develop pastoral care. Sometimes the orientation of pastoral care becomes blurred because it is solution-oriented. Through this perspective, solutions cannot be a measure of the success of pastoral care. The main thing is how people who are struggling have the will to continue the process of living with God, even if it seems as if they are only facing a dead end.

Psalm 88 is an individual lamentation Psalm that illustrates the fact that not all struggles can be resolved quickly and easily. Sometimes the struggle seems to reach a dead end. God seemed to turn away and choose silence to see the suffering. However, the awareness of God's existence as the source of life will lead those who are struggling to

⁴¹ Chang-bok Lee, "Pastoral Counseling on the Crisis of Death," *Gospel and Practical Theology* 5(2003), 251,

embrace the silent God actively. A way that teaches us to keep shouting out all the burdens and pains. A way that teaches about active waiting. The way to make people continue to realize that God is the Source of Life is so precious that He cannot be replaced.

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