



WHEN GOD BECOMES THE ENEMY ... PSALM 88 – BEYOND THEODICY

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If God wants to prevent suffering in the world but cannot, God is not almighty. If God can prevent suffering in the world but does not want to, God is not good.

Here is expressed the contradiction that became the “rock of atheism” for Georg Büchner, a young German poet at the beginning of the 19th century: If God is good and almighty, God must prevent suffering in the world. If God does not do so, he is not God – and then God is not. The experience of an imperfect world, the experience of existential suffering of all kinds – illness, plagues, failed harvests, famine, natural catastrophes, war, terror, genocide, to name just a few – that strike people without any cause, speak against a good, almighty God – so God is not. So far so good. The alternatives seem clear, and according to Büchner, the solution to the problem resulting from this is also clear: There cannot be a God. The lived fact that speaks against Büchner: Since the 19th century, the whole world has not at all become atheistic. According to the Protestant theologian Dorothee Sölle, it is possible “to believe in God atheistically”. This means, that we have to let go of our previously formed (theistic) ideas of God in order to be able to encounter the living God. Thus, I want to turn around the problem behind the formula quoted at the beginning: What is at stake is not “God”, but rather our perception of God, our way of dealing with God, and not least, our way of dealing with ourselves. The series of Psalms for this Bible Week offers us a text that is particularly suitable for broadening our perception of God, our way of dealing with God and with ourselves – beyond theodicy (the attempts to justify God in the face of the suffering in the world). This is Psalm 88, the next to the last Psalm in the third book of the Psalms. So as to be able to appreciate fully the added value of this biblical text, a brief look at the history of attempts to justify God through reflection in the face of the world’s suffering is necessary.

The problem of reconciling a good and almighty God with the suffering in the world is by no means a problem that only came up in modern times. Already in Greek Antiquity, the philosopher Epicure (341–270 BCE) expressed it as follows:

“Either God wants to remove the evils and cannot do so, or he can do so and does not want to, or he cannot do so and does not want to do so, or he can do so and wants to do so. Now if he wants to and cannot, he is weak, which does not apply to God. If he can and does not want to, he is resentful, which is also foreign to God. If he does not want to and cannot, he is both resentful and weak, and then also not God. But if he wants to and can, which alone is proper for God, then whence do the evils come and why does he not take them away?”¹

For Epicure, this question remains unanswered, but it does state the level that one is called up to overcome through reflection. Ever since, numerous philosophers and following them, theologians

¹ Quoted (in German) according to Willert, p. 97.

have tried to make this leap. Epicure expressed the unshakable premise: *by his being, God is good and almighty, God is perfect*, and nothing can change this. That also determines the path for reflection: What is at stake is a *justification* of this good and almighty God in the face of the suffering in the world. An alternative path does not seem conceivable. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz is the philosopher who undertook the last extensive attempt to give such a justification and who gave this reflective experiment its name: theodicy.

Very roughly, his approach can be sketched as follows:² Of course God is the absolutely perfect and good being. In this, Leibniz is following the premise that had already been set by tradition. The world and the human being are God's work. So why are the world and the human being not perfect and good? If they were perfect and good, they themselves would be divine and not creatures. The *created* world as such cannot be perfect and good, but according to Leibniz's conviction, it is the best of all possible worlds that God could create. This best of all possible worlds is based on the law of the "pre-stabilized harmony" in the world order that is planned and created by God. In that world order, everything has its unshakable place and everything has its own good meaning, including what is bad, evil and suffering. Thus it is possible for Leibniz to see evil and suffering neither as a principle that goes against the divine nor as something caused by God. Evil and suffering are simply a lack of the good, which springs from the nature of the world and the human being as creatures. According to Leibniz, there are three kinds of evil: metaphysical evil, which is the imperfection that springs from the finite and limited nature of the world; physical evil, which is pain that comes with matter and corporeality; and moral evil, which is the sinful intentions of the human being that are a consequence of the free will of the human being as an imperfect being. And the meaning of all these evils? Along with their place in the plan of the divine world order, the full meaning of which will only be revealed in the future, there remains the further answer to the question on their meaning, which says that they are a means for education and punishment, which is why God, the infinitely Good, allows evil.

If the closed and steep nature of this system has left you shuddering, relax: Is not one consequence of Leibniz's thought that the philosopher, who is also a representative of the imperfect human genus, can neither grasp God nor the meaning of suffering in a perfect way? Already the philosophers of the following generation felt what was lacking in Leibniz's system, and leading them all Voltaire and Kant. Leibniz's solution to the theodicy question inevitably gives rise to new problems and questions: What kind of a God is that? Is the God of Leibniz's system not perfectly abstract and "bloodless" in his perfect goodness and almighty power? And above all: in the face of the concrete experience of suffering, does not every systematic and generally valid explanation only lead to cynicism?

So why are we dealing here with a thinker whose thought did not even completely convince his own contemporaries? It contains some themes that I encounter over and over again in biblical adult education or in religious education in school, and these themes are then even considered to be biblical, for example the conviction, that everything is predetermined and gets its meaning from that; or that God uses suffering as a pedagogical measure or as a means of punishment. I will get to what is biblical in just a minute. But first, allow me to take a look at a thinker of the 19th century.

The Danish religious philosopher Søren Kierkegaard does not set up an extensive system, but tries rather to think through the concept "almighty"³ in such a way that God's being almighty and God's being good can go together without it being possible to challenge these with the suffering in the world. Kierkegaard determines God's setting his creature the human being free as a deed that flows from the fact that God is almighty. According to Kierkegaard, being almighty does not make the creature dependent but rather independent. It corresponds with the being of the one who is almighty to withdraw entirely and to give independence to that which was created and called into being by the one who is almighty. Thus the one who is almighty appears at the same time as the

² The following presentation is based on: Willert, p. 99, as well as Küng, pp. 10-18.

³ The summary of Kierkegaard's thinking is based on a paragraph in his journals: Kierkegaard, Volume 1, p. 291.

one who is good, and the suffering appears as the unavoidable consequence of the freedom of the independent human being, who has been liberated by the Almighty.

Do you now feel set free? At least this approach seems less overwhelming than Leibniz's system. However, in comparing it with Leibniz, there are a few things that remain constant. First of all, this also is an approach through a *thought* process in which God is an *object of reflection*. Moreover, God's goodness and almighty power are not questioned; we remain with this unshakable premise. What is at stake is to defend it and to do so at a level that is generally valid. In the same way, the "explanation" of suffering remains general (-ly valid), as suffering is not in contradiction with God's goodness and almighty power. Like in Leibniz's system, this ignores the concrete experience of suffering.

Is it at all possible to explain suffering? Who decides what is the "meaning of suffering", who may speak about it? What is such speaking like when it does not ignore the concrete experience of suffering? And what role does God have then? Does God have to be justified because God seems to be untouchable in his goodness and almighty power? – If we turn everything around that seems to be irreversible in the philosophical approach, if we replace the generally valid abstract system with the concrete I-statement, if we let the suffering human being speak instead of the philosopher, if that person doesn't talk *about* God but *with* God, if the reflective experiment is replaced by encounter, and if in this encounter, God does not have to be spared, then we are with what is biblical, then we are with Psalm 88!

Among the 150 psalms in the Book of Psalms as we have it in the collection of biblical books, Psalm 88 is unique. Within the genre of songs of lamentation, it is provocatively special. In contrast to all other songs of lamentation in the psalter, Psalm 88 offers neither the perspective of coming salvation nor a retrospective look at the experience of salvation from distress; and correspondingly, in the face of the enemy, the praise of God and thanksgiving for salvation are missing. In addition, complaint about God and about the enemy coincide, for here God himself appears as the enemy with whom the person saying "I"⁴ is arguing. In that, this psalm is related to texts outside of the psalter such as the Book of Lamentations and texts from the Book of Job. Because of these particularities, F.L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger also call Psalm 88 a "theodicy lamentation"⁵. Wasn't theodicy the justification of the almighty and good God in the face of suffering in the world? The person saying "I" in Psalm 88 does not embark on that. He enters into the process of arguing with God with self-confidence and without fear, he does not embellish reality, he does not exonerate God, and thereby he survives in suffering. Psalm 88 persists in lamentation, but it does not get stuck in one place. The dynamic in the process of argumentation expressed in this text goes hand in hand with the poetic form and organization of the text. In the following, I shall go through Psalm 88 based on the following structure:⁶

The text is made up of two large sections, whereby the first large section (stanza 1) consists of verses 2-9, which form nine verse lines. The last verse line begins with the reproach: *You have removed my close friends from me* (9a), *you have made me an abomination to them* (9b), and it ends with what results from this: *((I am)) caught / locked in – and I cannot get out* (9c). The three-part verse 10 with its call for help forms the psalm's centre and axis, and it has a concluding,

⁴ For the sake of linguistic smoothness, I shall limit myself in the following path through Psalm 88 to the masculine form of "the person saying I" or of "the person praying". That does not mean that a female person speaking or praying the Psalm has to be excluded. In the last part of the talk, I shall speak of a possible setting in which the "I" could be a female speaker.

⁵ Hossfeld / Zenger, p. 570.

⁶ In contrast to Fokkelman, *Major Poems* III, 154-159; id., *Reading Biblical Poetry* 112f; Weber, *Werkbuch Psalmen* II, 101f. Because of the strategic place of the key word "darkness", Fokkelman argues for dividing the psalm into three stanzas; Weber divides it into two stanzas with a centre.

framing and opening function in relation to the two large sections (stanzas). The second large section (stanza II) consists of the verses 11-19, which also form nine verse lines. The last verse line begins with a differentiated reproach in comparison to 9a: *You have removed from me my friend and my companions* (19a), and it ends with what results from this: *my close friends – darkness* (19b).

Both in the first and in the second stanza, three main emphases can be recognized: the request for help as well as the lament in the first person, and the charge against God, which are elements of the song of lamentation, and the realm of the dead as the dominant theme. They point to one another by means of connecting words. With the support of further linguistic and syntactic signals, I see the following detailed structure in the verses:

I	A	(1)	2-3	Addressing God with an introductory call for help	I – you
	B	(2)	4-5	Lamentation I: Mental state	I – realm of the dead
		(3)	6-7	Transition to Lamentation II	I – realm of the dead – you - I
	C	(4)	8-9	Lamentation II: Charge against God	Your anger – I – my close friends
	X	(5)	10	Call for help	I – you
II	B'	(6)	11-13	General reflection on Lamentation I	YHWH and the realm of the dead
	A'	(7)	14-16	Call for help and argumentation / reproach	I – you
	C'	(8)	17-19	Lamentation II: Charge against God	Your anger – I – my close friends

The order of the strophes differs from the usual order: playful (ABC/C'B'A'), concentric (ABCXC'B'A') or parallel (ABC/A'B'C'); this can be read as mirroring an order that has been thrown out of joint. For the God from whom the person saying "I" expects help is the same who looks to him like the enemy!

[¹ A Song, a Psalm of the Sons of Korah, for the chief musician, to be sung upon *machalat*; a *maskil* (teaching poem, wisdom song) of Heman the Ezrahite]

² YHWH, God of my salvation,
I cry during the day, in the night (I am) before you.

³ May my prayer come before your face.
Incline your ear to my loud pleading.

Don't speak about God but with / to God! In his address, the person praying shows his trust that salvation is to be expected from this God whom he is addressing. In correspondence with this, he turns totally to his God, including everything: during the day and during the night – always; owing to the distress in which he finds himself, owing to the addressee from whom alone salvation can be expected. What distress causes the person praying to thus call for help?

⁴ Yes, my soul is (= I am) satiated with evil,
and my life touches the realm of the dead.

⁵ I am counted among those who go down to the pit,
I am (become) like a man without strength.

Here, what is totally at the centre is not the distress but rather the "I" and his mental state. The verses are about what the distress has made of the "I", the person praying: in our day to day speaking we would say that he is "totally exhausted", he "is knocked out"; and in the second expression, we have an image that can give us a visual idea of this mental state. The person

praying Psalm 88 has even stronger images available: He places his mental state into relation with the realm of the dead and with those who are dead; he is literally at the end! He has been robbed of all his possibilities to act, he is powerless, he has no strength and no future perspective. There is another special point in this set of images: The realm of the dead is considered to be the place where God is far away, the God of the living cannot be in the place of the dead, God does not “work” there. Correspondingly, God is totally absent in this strophe, the person praying does not address God, God does not appear as one acting. Whatever the distress of the person praying consists of, it brings about loneliness, isolation, distance from God!

⁶ Among the dead ((I am)) set free
like people beaten to death who lie in the grave,
of whom you no longer think / whom you no longer remember
and / for they, they are cut off from your hand.

⁷ You have moved me to the lowest / deepest pit,
to *darknesses* (dark places), to the depths of the sea.

What a paradox at the beginning of the strophe! The person praying thus gives the image of the realm of the dead and those who are dead a special point: The condition of loneliness, of isolation, of distance from God – being among the dead – means for him “to be liberated”. He cannot find this in life, life with the distress he is experiencing imprisons him (v. 9). The Hebrew word for “liberated”, which causes a lot of trouble to many translators, points to the release from enslavement and creates a link to the opening lament of Job (Job 3:19) – a spiritual relative of the person praying Psalm 88! Now God comes into play explicitly at the place of the dead as one who is not acting: *You no longer remember them*. And from the opposite perspective: *They are cut off from your hand*. And then another surprising point: The one who just now was not acting in the place of the dead, now appears as one who is acting, but against the person praying! The place where things are happening does not change: *You have moved me to the lowest / deepest pit, to the depths (of the sea)*. Here, God appears as the evil-doer who is responsible for the existential distress from which the person praying cries to the “God of my salvation”. God is not the partner in the alliance against the enemies, as in numerous other psalms of lamentation. God himself is the enemy, the one causing the suffering; God becomes the one accused. And the conclusion of this strophe presents itself as an insurmountable wall of synonyms for the realm of the dead as the place of the greatest possible distance (from God) and the greatest possible darkness, as the place without any perspective, the place out of which there is no path.

⁸ Your surge of anger lies hard upon me,
and you let all your waves press down ((upon me)).

⁹ You have removed my close friends from me;
You have made me an abomination to them,
((I am)) caught / locked in – and I cannot get out.

The wall of darkness has been built, but the spell around charging God has been broken. Now the relationship between God and the person saying “I” is being tested. And the person saying “I” begins the confrontation and accuses: It is you! The person praying uses strong images of overwhelming floods and the overpowering force of water⁷ to make clear that he feels like the victim of God’s anger which rains down upon him without a break, without mercy, unsparingly, and which presses upon him and overwhelms, tortures, breaks, destroys him. This happens for no reason, for the person praying does not admit any guilt, which in other texts would happen in connection with a request to be spared the divine anger. There is bitter irony in the expression: *Your surge of anger lies hard upon me*, since the Hebrew word behind “lies hard upon me” is otherwise used almost exclusively in positive connections meaning “supporting, assisting”. With the choice of the verb “to let lie”, all doubts around God’s role as the merciless aggressor, and the violent nature of what God is doing are scattered, for this verb is also used to express deeds of

⁷ Comparable images can be found in the psalm of Jona in Jona 2.

violence. If the person praying is not spared in what happens to him, God is also not spared in the praying person's accusation.

Verse 9 continues the flood of accusations with a charge that is unique in the Psalms: You have removed my close friends from me. You have made me an abomination⁸ to them. Such a word is only in one other place – in the mouth of the soul mate Job (Job 19:13-19). The result: the solitary confinement imposed by God turns the life of the praying person into a prison, makes his life to be as if cut off and like the isolation in the realm of the dead. But there the person praying is liberated (v. 6).

¹⁰ My eye is dying of distress,
I call to you, YHWH, every day / all day.
I stretch out my hands to you.

The three-part call for help is at the centre of the Psalm; on the one hand, it refers back to the introductory call for help in v. 2, and on the other hand, it anticipates the renewed call for help in v. 14. After strophe 4 (vs. 8-9), this call for help is now an expression of a paradoxical relationship with God: After the person praying emphasizes his distressful state and his sorrow in the first part of the verse (10a), in his need, in his distress he then turns precisely to this God whom he experiences as his enemy to cry for salvation through continual calling (10b) and through his pleading gesture (10c).

What can God do? What must God do?

¹¹ For the dead – you will / can do a miracle
(or) will spirits of the dead rise up, praise you?
¹² Does anyone in the grave tell of love and care,
of your fidelity in the place of destruction?
¹³ Is your wonderful working recognized in *darkness*
(or) your justice in the land of forgetting?

God could and must bring salvation, but not where the person praying had before placed himself existentially in his life's distress, in the realm of the dead (vs. 4/5, vs. 6/7). Three double questions that must all be answered with "no" – except for the fact that they can also express sarcasm or desperate hope – aim beyond the praying person's situation towards a generally valid recognition: God's qualities, *God's loving care* (*ħaesaed*), *God's fidelity* (*ae maet*); *God's wonderful working* (*paetae*), *God's righteousness* (*šdaqa*) remain ineffective here – *in the pit – in the place of destruction; in darkness – in the land of forgetting* – they do not resonate. Similar questions are to be found in Psalm 6 and Psalm 30, and there they are to be understood as a passionate appeal: Do something, God, otherwise you will lose an admirer! I am no longer of any use to you in the realm of the dead!

¹⁴ But I, to you, YHWH, I cry for salvation
and may my prayer come to meet you in the morning.
¹⁵ Why, YHWH, do you reject my soul (= me),
do you hide your face from me?
¹⁶ I (am) in distress and fading away since my youth;
I bear your terrors, I am helpless / I am rigid.

But it has not yet come to that. The person praying speaks again in the land of the living, not as an admirer but still as an accuser! In this role, he does not count himself among the shadowy spirits of the dead who have no relationship with YHWH. He is still in the midst of life, he experiences live suffering caused by YHWH himself, and as a living being, he enters into a relationship with YHWH and into argumentation with him, the "God of my salvation": But I know of your qualities

⁸ The concept "abomination" is particularly frequent in cultic connections and means everything that is impure and therefore an abomination and a taboo.

and I make appeal to them when I charge, I tell of your love and care, of your fidelity, by suing for them; I acknowledge your wonderful working, your righteousness by suing for them – *and may my prayer come to meet you in the morning*⁹.

The fact that this does not happen is expressed in the following two questions: *Why, YHWH, do you reject me, do you hide your face from me?* God's face turned towards the person means light, life; the face turned away – darkness! The effect of God's face turned away is expressed in an impressive way in Ps 104:29: *When you hide your face, they are out of their mind, when you take their breath, they disappear and return to dust.* Once again the question leads us back to Job;¹⁰ he too has the question: "Why do you hide your face from me?" (Job 13:24)

The person praying looks with a level head at his state and says of himself that he is *fading away since (his) youth*. This indicates less a serious illness;¹¹ rather, reading it with reference to Ps 104:29, it expresses the *conditio humana*, "the human being's general deterioration towards death".¹² Behind this is the recognition: On my own, I am in any case going towards death, only you make life possible! And if we read this in reference to the questions at the centre of the strophe, a further question arises: So why don't you do it? Why don't you do it for me?

What remains is helplessness¹³ in the face of the attempts to be heard by God that have so far failed; this helplessness is the summarized expression of the person's not understanding God's enigmatic, aggressive deeds and God's equally enigmatic silence. I am helpless – having reached this point, I no longer know what I should do, I simply don't know how to continue, and also: I can't go on.

¹⁷ The flood of your anger passes over me,
your terrible deeds destroy me.

¹⁸ They surround me like water every day / all day,
together they crowd around me.

¹⁹ You have removed from me my friend and companion,
my close friends – *darkness*.

In his helplessness, the person praying now returns to his charging God the enemy as expressed in verses 8 and 9 (strophe 4), and he repeats in varied ways the points of accusation. This seems to be the only still remaining possibility of resistance, the only possibility to maintain his dignity while remaining with the accusation, the only expression of hope against all hopelessness that is still possible, the last possible appeal.

The last line of the verse pointedly varies the point of accusation as expressed in verse 9: "My close friends" now stands at the summit of the second half of the verse (as the subject). Next to it is the Psalm's key word "darkness" as the predicate and the last word. Thus a highly remarkable final period is placed: My close friends (are) darkness. Here, we are in the dark; the text does not allow any other exit except that of darkness, offers no other perspective than that of darkness. Only YHWH, the "God of my salvation" could offer a different perspective, that of light. That is why the person praying holds on to God, although this perspective is not offered him here. Story of a crisis in relationship. The end is open.

⁹ The theme of the morning used here strengthens the expectation of being heard, since the morning after the night is considered to be the time of salvation. Cf. Hossfeld / Zenger, p. 573.

¹⁰ The only instance in the Psalms is the Psalm of Korah, Ps 44:25, there together with the request: "and do not reject us forever".

¹¹ ELB and EIN suggest this; cf. also Gross, 48ff.

¹² Cf. also Hossfeld / Zenger, p. 573.

¹³ The meaning of the last verb in v. 16 is difficult to grasp, since in the entire Old Testament, it appears only here and its origin has not been sufficiently clarified. This also explains the differences in the standard translations: EIN: *ich bin zerquält* (I am tortured); ELB: *ich bin verwirrt* (I am confused); LUT: *dass ich fast verzage* (so that I almost give up); ZÜR: *Ich bin schutzlos deinem Schrecken ausgeliefert* (I am handed over to your terror without protection). The context as a whole supports the translation based on the Aramaic, "I am helpless".

So where can a perspective be found? Surely not in philosophical or theological systems of thought, surely not in systems that justify God, but very much so in a conversation with other biblical texts, with other experiences. By its title as well as through individual themes, Psalm 88 is connected with other Psalms. Thus other experiences of God are placed alongside of the experience of the person saying “I” in Psalm 88. At various points, I mentioned especially the connections with the Book of Job. In his unsparing accusation, Job is related to the person praying Psalm 88, and at the end, God himself justifies Job in opposition to his friends, because in his unsparing accusation, Job spoke to God and not like his friends *about* God in terms of a general system (Job 42:7).¹⁴ Another biblical figure who lost everything through no fault of her own and who remains without any future perspective and who could therefore make the accusation contained in Psalm 88 is Naomi. She limits what she says to the statement that God has acted as an enemy towards her (Ruth 1:13.20). She does not want to draw her daughters-in-law into her fate. She no longer counts on God’s loving care (*hæsaed*). But she encounters this / it happens to her in her daughter-in-law Ruth, who wants to share with her the hopeless fate of a widow and thus overcomes this fate together with her. God’s *hæsaed* can be experienced again in Ruth’s deeds. So long as we can share our experiences, so long as people walk with us in whom something of God’s qualities shines forth, there is a perspective – beyond the lifeless, abstract justification of God in the face of suffering.

Or should we rather say: So long as people walk with us in whom something of God’s qualities shines forth, God is justified?

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¹⁴ Cf. Fokkelman, Job, pp. 262f.