

Finding Spiritual Healing

After Trauma or Loss

NICK HAMILTON





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Dedicated to Karen, Emily, Nathan, and Noah who have lived with me through the many journeys that led to the writing of this book.

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Introduction

"Darkness is my closest friend."
Psalm 88:18b NIT

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001. THE WARS in Afghanistan and Iraq. The 2004 South Asian tsunami. Hurricane Katrina. The global financial meltdown. The COVID-19 pandemic. Russia's invasion of Ukraine. An economy on the brink of failure with the greatest jump in inflation in nearly a half century. That's all just in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. All of this is added to the "routine" pain that we see in our world on a regular basis. Suffering like murder, rape and sexual assault, cancer, car accidents, heart attacks, Alzheimer's, global hunger and poverty, abuse, neglect, human trafficking, divorce—the list keeps going, just like the Energizer bunny. Add it all up: We live in a dark world.

Sure, there are good people who are trying to be a light in such a darkened world. The work they do is heroic and makes a significant difference for many people. However, I'd like to talk about darkness. Most people want to move past darkness. Ignore it. Pretend that it doesn't exist or at least paint a nice face on darkness and move on. But for many people, darkness just won't go away. Their lives have been forever altered by some horrific event, and they will never be the same again.

May I invite you on a journey? If you have read this far, you probably already know what it feels like to experience darkness. My desire is to offer not just a path through the darkness, but a way to get in touch with the darkness you are experiencing in a way that makes it less scary, in a way that will help you be able to say, "Yes, this is what happened to me," and no longer be shocked by it or afraid of it.

For me, this has been a lifelong journey. In my late teens and early twenties I went through several bouts of depression that were never diagnosed. Not only were they never diagnosed, but I also tried my best to never let anyone know about them. I did what so many other people do: I painted a nice face on my life so that no one would know that anything was wrong. The issues that sparked this depression for me were issues that nearly everyone struggles with in their late teens and early twenties: relationship issues, direction in life, and identity.

Then, I reconnected with my faith. From ages seventeen to twenty-one, I had abandoned the Christian faith of my youth. But somehow, when I reconnected, it all felt new. It felt as though the pieces of my life were all beginning to come together. I had new and deeper friendships than I had ever experienced, the direction I had longed for in life began to come into focus, and I started to become more comfortable in my own skin.

A few years later, I took a class in college in Hebrew wisdom literature. I remember thinking, *If only the world understood these texts, they would have a much better framework for thinking about pain in our world.* Such thoughts came from the idea that, for many people, the evil that exists in our world becomes a reason

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to not believe in God. I thought that those texts in particular would, perhaps, help restore people's trust in God.

In the years that followed, I became a military chaplain. I served on an aircraft carrier on 9/11, deployed with US Marines to Iraq, and served inside the detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. For nearly twenty years I walked with US Sailors and Marines during some of their toughest and darkest times. I listened to their stories and tried to help them make sense of life in the aftermath and—when possible—help them find God in what they had experienced.

When I retired from the military, I thought I was done with that kind of work, only to find myself leading a team of hospital chaplains through the global pandemic of COVID-19. We did our best to help families communicate with those who were dying when no one was allowed into the hospital; we gowned up and went into COVID rooms alongside other healthcare professionals; and we encouraged exhausted staff. This was added to the daily grind of tragedies like heart attacks, car accidents, and shootings.

What I offer in these pages is the fruit of those thirty years of counseling others through the darkness. My hope is for this book to become a part of your journey to come to terms with whatever form of darkness has descended upon your life. More than that, I hope you will be able to find God in the middle of whatever darkness in which you find yourself.

How to Read This Book

SINCE YOU ARE READING THIS book, first let me say, "Congratulations!" You have taken a huge step in dealing with the pain, hurt, and sorrow related to grief or the traumatic events of your life. Because this is such a huge step, and because this book addresses sensitive wounds, I want to provide some guidance about how to read this book and what to expect. Second, please pace yourself. You may get emotional as you read, so read it at a pace that works for you. This book is not intended to be read in one sitting. It is meant to be a companion for you as your journey through life takes you back to places. Go at your own pace. If at any time you find yourself overwhelmed, put the book down and pick it up when you are ready again.

I mentioned above that this book is meant to be a companion, but what does that mean in practical terms? It means, simply, that it is not meant as a replacement for therapy. If you have a counselor whom you trust, great! Let them know that you are reading this book to augment what you are doing in your counseling sessions. If you have never seen a counselor, I encourage you to reach out and talk to someone, particularly now, as you begin to read.

Also, please keep an open mind. You may feel you do not have use for God, or church, or religion at this time. My hope

is, at some point, you may look back through everything and say something like, "I thought God had abandoned me completely and, quite frankly, wondered if there was a God. Now, I realize that He was with me through it all." For now, though, I'm grateful you're here and willing to explore this book as part of your healing.

Finally, while we spend most of this book on emotional and spiritual counsel, occasionally there is a need to explain clinical terms, or how therapists describe the experience of you or someone you love. There are a couple of terms that will be helpful to know up front. The first is *PTSD*, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In pop culture, this term is frequently overused or even abused. PTSD is a diagnosable mental health condition and is defined by the American Psychiatric Association's fifth edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5)*. For the full *DSM-5* definition of PTSD, please see the appendix.

The second term worth defining at this point is *moral injury*. Moral injury is a term that describes the moral and ethical conflict that is often the result of witnessing horrifying events. The term originated from psychologists who were treating Vietnam veterans. They discovered that, in many cases, there was a moral aspect of an event that went beyond the definition of PTSD. Researchers began to delve into the subject and, as they did, coined the term *moral injury*. The two most prominent definitions of moral injury are also included in the appendix.

Chapter 1

Making Friends with Darkness

"Darkness is my closest friend."
Psalm 88:18b NLT

PAIN EXISTS IN OUR WORLD. Darkness is a part of life. Let those two phrases sink in for a moment. While pain and dark times are inevitably part of the human experience, none of us wants to go through such times. Physical pain is the body's way of letting us know that something is wrong—that we should avoid whatever is causing us pain. Our natural reaction to avoidance also applies to us mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Western culture compounds this. For much of the modern era, Western culture has lauded those with a positive outlook on life and happy disposition. The British talk about keeping a "stiff upper lip," and here in the US, there is an adage that, "Nobody wants to be around a sourpuss." Yet deep emotions like fear, loneliness, sadness, depression, and anger are a part of life. Most people don't like those emotions. They don't want to experience them and especially do not want to witness others as they experience them.

As a chaplain, I have often been surprised at how few people are able to stay engaged with, and really listen to, someone as they are experiencing grief. But when someone is going through a tough time, what they need most is someone to be there with them. I learned this lesson the hard way in my late twenties. My wife and I had been married for just over a year when her dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer. The news was difficult for the family. A few hours after we learned about it, I tried to get my wife to "snap out of it," to "cheer up," because I, like so many, was uncomfortable with difficult emotions. It was an insensitive move and helped me to begin to understand how to be present during tough times.

As you can imagine, my desire to put difficult emotions away is not unique. It happens all too often—just at the moment when people need someone around them the most, friends and family choose to let people be alone. Sometimes this is a well-intentioned desire to give people their privacy. Often it is simply a way to get away from the heavy and intense feelings of the other person—because such feelings are hard. The result is that people can easily feel abandoned or betrayed in their times of deepest need. Add to this sense of abandonment the idea that people often see evil and pain in our world as evidence that there is no God. Put it all together and, for many people, the deepest points of their lives make them feel not only abandoned by family and friends, but by God as well. Perhaps you have been there. Grief, loss, and trauma are all a part of life. But those parts of life are difficult and can feel impossible to get through.

These feelings are not new. The psalms of ancient Israel capture many of these laments in what some have called The Psalms of Disorientation.¹ One of those is Psalm 88. Before you read it, take a deep breath and sit comfortably in your chair. Then, imagine the worst moment of your life. Now, read these words with all the emotion you can muster:

O LORD, God of my salvation,
I cry out to you by day.
I come to you at night.
Now hear my prayer;
listen to my cry.

For my life is full of troubles, and death draws near.

I am as good as dead, like a strong man with no strength left.

They have left me among the dead, and I lie like a corpse in a grave.

I am forgotten,

cut off from your care.

You have thrown me into the lowest pit, into the darkest depths.

Your anger weighs me down; with wave after wave you have engulfed me. *Interlude*

You have driven my friends away
by making me repulsive to them.
I am in a trap with no way of escape.
My eyes are blinded by my tears.

Each day I beg for your help, O LORD; I lift my hands to you for mercy.

Are your wonderful deeds of any use to the dead?

Do the dead rise up and praise you? *Interlude*

Can those in the grave declare your unfailing love?

Can they proclaim your faithfulness in the place of destruction?

Can the darkness speak of your wonderful deeds?

Can anyone in the land of forgetfulness talk about your righteousness?

- O Lord, I cry out to you.

 I will keep on pleading day by day.
- O LORD, why do you reject me?
 Why do you turn your face from me?
- I have been sick and close to death since my youth.

I stand helpless and desperate before your terrors.

Your fierce anger has overwhelmed me. Your terrors have paralyzed me.

They swirl around me like floodwaters all day long.

They have engulfed me completely.

You have taken away my companions and loved ones.

Darkness is my closest friend. (NLT)

Emotion

Psalm 88 captures the raw emotion of someone who has experienced tragedy or difficulty in life. It does not put a nice bow on everything. The writer just lets it all out: the hurt, the anger, and even the accusations that God has not only allowed him to be in his situation but has intentionally left him there. The conclusion? "Darkness is my closest friend."

Several years ago I was leading a spirituality support group for veterans who had been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I decided to read Psalm 88 to the group. When I finished, I asked the group for reactions. One World War II veteran said, "It sounds like he's in deep \$#!^." This veteran had instinctively connected with the emotions of Psalm 88 (NLT). Look back at some of them:

"I am forgotten, cut off from your care" (v. 5b); "Your anger weighs me down . . ." (v. 7a); "I stand helpless and desperate before your terrors. Your fierce anger has overwhelmed me. Your terrors have paralyzed me." (vv. 15b–16)

The feelings described are those of helplessness, desperation, and being forgotten, which lead to other feelings of being weighed down, overwhelmed, and paralyzed. But notice what is

not present. There is no judgment about these feelings. They are expressed as a matter of fact. Perhaps the ancient world was better at expressing grief related to tragedy than we are. Far too often in the modern world, particularly in Western Christianity, such emotions are looked down upon—even viewed as indicative of a person having no faith, having lost their faith in God, or worse, seen as blasphemous. I recently met a man who admitted to looking down on people who felt abandoned by God.

But trauma, grief, and loss *do* leave a person feeling overwhelmed, weighed down, and helpless. These are the feelings often described by many people who suffer from PTSD, depression, and other forms of loss or mental health disorders. They are natural reactions to the abnormal situation in which people find themselves in the wake of horrific events.

The veteran's group that I described above was thankful to be able to talk together about their emotions and experiences of war. Why? Talking about their experiences with others who had been through something similar helped them feel less forgotten. Consider for a moment how their experiences would make someone feel. Think about the helplessness, desperation, and sense of being forgotten. All of these veterans knew what it was like to fear for their lives. They had all known the sudden loss of friends in war. They had each experienced the horrors of waking up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat after dreaming, yet again, about their combat experiences. They each knew what it was like to be constantly looking over their shoulders, scanning for threats. They understood the scorn of loved ones who just could not cope with their hypervigilance. They lived daily with

haunting memories and what-ifs such as, "Would my friend still be alive if the lieutenant wouldn't have been so incompetent?" They understood what it was like to be going about their normal lives and suddenly have something trigger them in a way that they were instantly transported back to the moment of their trauma as if they were reliving it right then.

Because of those shared experiences, there was natural camaraderie among the veterans. It helped them to feel less alone. Those who deal with significant challenges often feel alone because there are so few people around them who understand their stories, and fewer who understand their feelings in relation to what they have experienced. All of this stands to reason. It is impossible to have any idea what another person is feeling and experiencing unless you have walked in their footsteps. Even then, you can only relate to similar shared experiences.

Take, for example, the experience of the Vietnam veteran. Upon arrival "in country," he is designated the FNG—a term of derision for new arrivals whose life expectancy is often short. Those who live through the first month of combat are only then accepted by the unit as someone who could pull their weight and not get others killed. Over the next year, there will be daily patrols in the jungle and regular firefights; the loss of friends and buddies comes all too regularly. Time and location begin to fade away as the otherworldly experience of life in that place becomes the only reality known. There is occasional talk about "back in the world," meaning home. But it is as far distant emotionally and spiritually as it is in miles.

Then one day someone comes along and says, "Your DEROS (Date Estimated Return from Overseas) is up." Within twenty-four hours you are on a plane back to the States. Within forty-eight hours you may have had the experience of being spit upon by war protesters. Within seventy-two hours you are eating mashed potatoes at your mom's table, and within ninety-six hours, your dad is saying, "Okay, now that you are back, it's time to get a job." All the while your mind is on the buddies you lost and on those you left behind, wondering what is happening to them. There may be gratitude for surviving, but more likely there is an intense guilt for feeling like you abandoned your brothers. There is anger, confusion, grief, and a myriad of other feelings that are so overwhelming—but you don't know how to begin describing those thoughts and feelings to others. You may try once or twice, but the reactions you get cause you to stop trying. You are feeling so alone.

A young Marine and veteran of war in Afghanistan once described to me what the author of Psalm 88 was getting at when he spoke of feeling helpless, desperate, and forgotten. Specifically, this young man felt cut off from God's care. He said that while he was in Afghanistan, he was the guy in his squad who would lead others in prayer before going "outside the wire." He said, "We prayed that we wouldn't get hit [by an improvised explosive device (IED)] and we got hit; we prayed that everyone would be safe, and we still lost guys." His conclusion was that God could not exist because, if He did, He certainly should have answered their prayers. As a result, he turned away from the Christian faith of his childhood and struggled to make sense of a life in

which he could no longer believe in God. This young man's story demonstrates the unfortunate reality that sometimes bad things happen in our world—things that leave people feeling forgotten and isolated from God and others. Traumas are so overwhelming that they cause them to question their core assumptions of life and leave them feeling alone.

Arguments

But it is not just about getting in touch with our emotions. At the heart of the matter are circumstances and problems that create these emotions in the first place. Notice the six questions that the author of Psalm 88 (NLT) asks God:

- 1. Are your wonderful deeds of any use to the dead? (v. 10a)
- 2. Do the dead rise up and praise you? (v. 10b)
- 3. Can those in the grave declare your unfailing love? (v. 11a)
- 4. Can they proclaim your faithfulness in the place of destruction? (v. 11b)
- 5. Can the darkness speak of your wonderful deeds? (v. 12a)
- 6. Can anyone in the land of forgetfulness talk about your righteousness? (v. 12b)

If you were to sum up these questions, they all have one remarkable theme and boil down to a single question: "God, what good am I to You if I am dead?" You can almost hear

someone saying, "What good are the great stories of Your miracles and Your activity if I'm dead? If I'm dead, I can't worship or praise You; I can't talk about how great Your love is! The dead can't talk about such things."

Psalm 88 surfaces two important issues: first, the universal human experience of wondering where God is during seasons of tragedy and pain (see chapter 2). The other is the second-guessing of God. A more polite way to say it is wondering where God's miracles are when we experience our own seasons of distress and grief.

These questions describe the gut-wrenching experiences of life; the times when you collapse on the floor and scream, "Oh, God!" But no words follow. Then days, weeks, months, or years later you find you are still in the same place. No answers to why tragedy struck and the void of loss remains. You begin to ask, quietly at first, and then more insistently, "God, what happened? I believed in You—I trusted in You—and now this?" But there are always more questions than answers. Just like the writer of the psalm, you are left sitting alone in the darkness wondering about everything in life.

Has that ever been your experience? You are going through a particularly difficult time in life and you pray for a miracle, and nothing happens. You pray harder—and still nothing. You begin wondering why God is not answering. You may say something such as: "If God can part the Red Sea, why can He not help with my situation?" When there has been a trauma, this question is even more acute, more intense: "God, why didn't You prevent the [fill-in-the-blank] from happening?"

Many people asked this question in the days and weeks following 9/11. Churches and synagogues around the US were more crowded than they had been at any point in recent memory. There was a searching—a longing—to understand what had happened. Many were angry and asked why God had not prevented such a horrific tragedy. Soon, however, the influx of people into places of worship seemed to end. It was as if people had sought out God in the aftermath of their trauma and tragedy, but left feeling disappointed when there were no answers to why God had allowed such a horrific event and did not prevent it. The reality is that the world had forever changed! Almost three thousand people died that day. Untold numbers were traumatized as they watched the planes hit the towers. It seemed as though the only answers were related to finding those who had plotted and planned the attack. People seemed to give up on understanding why from a larger perspective and were content with security protocols and investigations that would reveal who was responsible.

The questions of the writer of Psalm 88 remain; here is my paraphrase: "God, where are You when I'm suffering?" "God, I've heard all of the Bible stories of Your miracles. Why aren't You acting now?" As human beings we long to live in a world that makes sense. Trauma turns that world upside down and leaves us struggling for equilibrium. We want answers when there are no answers. We want life to make sense again. We want someone or something to blame. We want God to act! We feel upended when He does not. We question if what we have believed is true.

One of my professors once said it this way: "We look at life and faith as if it were a mathematical formula: God's Law + our

obedience = blessing." When that formula is turned upside down, human beings ask why. "Why did 9/11 happen? How could God have allowed the Holocaust? Why did the tornado kill my family?" are but a few of these questions. The author of Psalm 88 wrestles with these kinds of questions and begs God for action. What I want you to see right now is that he is not condemned for asking them.

Perhaps the reason he is not condemned is that there is a total honesty in his questions; no pretense; no false agenda—just a human being struggling with some of the deepest and most profound questions of life, just like you and me. They were personal questions: "God, when are you going to help *me*?!"

My experience was not one of trauma or tragedy, but those same questions took center place in my life for some time. My son was sinking into depression while I was assigned overseas. Three times I asked to be transferred back to the US. Three times I was told "NO!" in the way that only the US military can do. I prayed. I searched the Bible. I prayed harder. Then I read a book that advised to pray and have faith that God will answer. I remember reading something like this: "Pray, and believe that God will answer this week." I believed and prayed more intensely. I expected something would change that very week. Nothing!

We then made the painful decision to send the family back to the US on our own dime. A year and a half of separation ensued. We continued to pray and, you guessed it, still nothing happened. I began to think that my own faith was defective, that God did not hear me. And I must confess, I grew discouraged and began asking many of the same questions as the author of

Psalm 88 did. It seemed that God was constantly doing miracles in other people's lives, but not mine. I heard the stories of how He had miraculously worked in so many situations, but mine remained unchanged. Again, my pain was not related to a traumatic situation, but trauma magnifies these feelings and amplifies the intensity of such questions.

For many people, such questions feel off-limits, and most people don't ever get this honest with God. For some reason they perceive it as taboo, that God will strike them dead for even thinking such things. So, people tend to distance themselves from God and try their best to push any such questions far from their minds. We risk living in denial and at an artificially created distance from God.

Permission and Space

Healing often begins when a person feels as though he has permission to talk about his experiences—no matter how deep or dark they may be. People need space to wrestle with what has happened in their lives, to say what is really on their minds and in their hearts in the aftermath of trauma or loss without fear of further rejection. Psalm 88 provides a pattern in which we can find such healing.

In my job as both a hospital chaplain and military chaplain, I often sat with people as they described to me the traumas and losses they had endured. Simply being able to tell the story of what they have experienced—without someone appearing shocked or judgmental—is healing in and of itself. The young

Marine who served in Afghanistan, whom I described earlier, is an example. He told me all the ways in which his experiences had affected him and his relationships. He told me about his recurring nightmares, his drinking, and several other behaviors that were related to the trauma. At the end of our time together, nothing had changed in his life, but he thanked me for providing him a safe place to talk about things that he couldn't talk about anywhere else.

The writer of Psalm 88 provides us with a sample of what such permission and space look like. He talks about all his emotions—helplessness, desperation, feeling forgotten. He also throws out all his questions to God and pleads with Him, bargaining with God. He reminds God of all his losses and even accuses God: "Your fierce anger has overwhelmed me. Your terrors have paralyzed me" (v. 16 NLT). In essence, he is saying to God, "You did this to me!"

Does it surprise you that such language is in the Bible? Many people are completely blown away that this passage is actually in the text of the Bible. Their preconceived notions suggest that the Bible only talks about "should" and "ought" and doesn't give latitude to actually be a human being. Christians often do the same thing. They think that they should automatically be better equipped at dealing with difficulty or think that somehow it is unchristian to wrestle with difficulty and doubt.

The structure and language of Psalm 88 and its presence in the Bible should give those who feel as though they have no one and nowhere to share their deepest emotions permission to express the pent-up emotions of dealing with trauma.

Structure and Voice

The challenge is that when trauma hits, we seldom have the words to describe what we are feeling inside. Difficulty talking about our experiences inevitably leads to further isolation. So, it only makes sense that sometimes we need help with our words to express what we are feeling.

Trauma stunts creativity. The brain records traumatic memories differently than others. Sometimes there are no words to describe the experiences of trauma—only gut feelings. Phrases like, "forgotten from your care," "cut off," "Am I any good to you dead?" (see vv. 5, 10 NLT) can bring words to latent feelings that one struggles to understand and cannot articulate.

Similar to the experience I described earlier with the veteran's group, I also once read Psalm 88 to a group of military service members who had been diagnosed with PTSD. Afterward, I asked each of them to use the framework of this text to write their own lament. It was a very powerful experience. Hardened Marines and Navy SEALs found the language they needed to capture what had been going on inside for a long time. Some began to find healing in that moment. Some began expressing emotions in ways they had not previously. Others were able to express their anger at God as a result of that experience. There seems to be something powerful about a simple—but scary—act of speaking what we are feeling.

Act of Faith

Similar to the mother who tells her child, "Use your words," when the child is upset about something, the words of this psalm can be a kick start to beginning to understand and put into words the depths of our feelings in the aftermath of horrific trauma, loss, and grief of multiple and complex types.

Part of the reason for this is that it is easy to judge someone else's experience from the outside. It is easy to say that the questions that the psalmist asks are an anathema to the Christian faith, until they are *your* questions. Some well-meaning pastors have written that Christians should never be in the state of despair that is described in Psalm 88.

Take another look at the passage. Look at the intimacy that the author expresses to God. It is a difficult conversation for sure, as we have already mentioned. But don't miss this—notice it, please—it may be a bit obvious, but notice that the author is still talking to God! He does not understand anything that has happened to him; he feels as though he has been abandoned by everyone; he is questioning everything that he thought he believed about God; he is accusing God of inflicting this pain upon him; he tells God that the only friend he has left is the darkness as he sits alone with these thoughts—but he is still talking to God. In other words, he is attempting to maintain a relationship with God despite the obstacles.

On a daily basis therapists talk with people in conflict. Healthy resolution of conflict always means getting everything out on the table. Only when everyone's feelings are understood, validated, and accepted can the relationship begin to move forward. If that is how we deal with conflict in our relationships with other people, why do we feel that we cannot do the same with God? Do we think that somehow He cannot handle our feelings? That is absurd. He is the one who imagined and created human emotion in the first place. To think that the God who created the entire universe might be threatened by your emotions is like saying that a parent is threatened by the temper tantrums of a two-year-old.

If dealing with conflict in our human relationships means continuing to talk with one another, how much more so is this true with God? God desires to have a relationship with you. To have a relationship means that you must talk—even about hard things. While God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, and makes no mistakes, we often don't understand and don't like what happens in life; we don't see all that God sees. When this happens, it feels like darkness is our closest friend. But God wants a relationship with you—which means talking with Him about all of the thoughts and feelings you have about everything in your life. Nothing is taboo or off-limits to Him; He can handle it even if it means that you are asking hard questions and telling Him about your most visceral emotions.

No Resolution

Those excruciating emotions often remain long after trauma is over. It seems as though there is nothing that can change them, because nothing can change the situation. It's sort of like

watching a European movie that just ends. You know, the kind that leaves you saying, "What? That's the end?!" The kind that has no resolution.

If you look back at Psalm 88, that is exactly what we find. We find someone who has poured his heart out to God; who has asked the most difficult questions about life; who, as an act of faith, is still trying to talk with God and keep up the relationship. But that's it. The author is still sitting in the pit of whatever circumstances caused him to write this text in the first place. His only conclusion, "Darkness is my closest friend" (v. 18 NLT).

Sometimes that's just the way life and a relationship with God is. Tragedy strikes and we don't understand. We want to move on and get back to some type of normalcy in life. But that seems impossible. Loved ones are still dead; the memories of the rape are still there and will never go away; the fear left over after nearly drowning seems irrational, but you can never go near water without breaking into a sweat; the fear of getting caught in a riot again makes you panic anytime you go to a crowded Walmart; you still instinctively swerve on the freeway anytime you notice something that suspiciously reminds you of what an IED looked like in Iraq; you still avoid anyone or anything that may remind you of what you have been through. Some people try to bury their difficult emotions and pretend that they do not exist—pretend that what caused them does not exist—in a denial of emotions. Other people cover them up; they selfmedicate with alcohol or drugs (both street drugs and abuse of prescription medications like opioid pain medications). Still others turn to illicit relationships, like having an affair, engaging

in the "hookup" culture, prostitution, or porn. They are longing to have a relationship that will fill the pain and emptiness they feel inside.

Ultimately, none of this helps. Even worse, reactions like avoidance and self-medicating only push people further from the healing they are seeking. Sometimes the only way to move forward is to sit still. The only way out of "the pit" is to sit in the pit for a while, to stay there long enough that you begin to accept the new realities of your life without trying to change them. Only then, after enough time has passed, can you look back and say, "That was the pit I was in."

How long does this go on? Only you will know. For example, in the 1990s romantic comedy *Sleepless in Seattle*, Tom Hanks's character describes to a radio psychiatrist what it was like to lose his wife. He says, "At first I had to remind myself to breathe in and out. Then after a while, I didn't have to remind myself to breathe in and out." For some it takes a lifetime. One Vietnam veteran did not begin to deal with his combat experience until forty years later, when he finally retired. He had been a workaholic and kept himself so busy that he did not have to think about Vietnam. When he finally retired, he had nothing to occupy his time and finally allowed himself to begin thinking about the pit he was in.

If you are going through a period of grief, trauma, or loss, perhaps the place that your healing needs to begin is to get comfortable with the statement of the psalmist, "Darkness is my closest friend" (v. 18 NLT). Right now, there is nothing else for

you to do than to simply begin to make friends with the darkness in which you find yourself.

Guided Reflection

Have your life experiences left you feeling as though darkness is your closest friend? Have you tried to make friends with that darkness in the past and failed? Use the following ideas while you find yourself in that pit of darkness:

- 1. Find a quiet place and read Psalm 88 again. As you do so, notice the raw emotion within the text. Then notice your own raw emotions that are touched as you read. For example, are there words that you noticed that make you feel angry, forgotten, or abandoned? Acknowledge those feelings. Don't label them as good or bad. Just begin to *notice* what you are feeling without judgment. As you notice your emotions, give yourself permission to *feel* how you feel (to be angry, if you are angry, etc.).
- 2. Get a blank notebook and use the words of Psalm 88 to write your own lament. Use its words to get you started if you feel stuck. But keep writing until you feel as though you have "hit bottom," or "spoken," as much as you feel you can.
- 3. Give yourself permission to ask God the hard questions, the ones that are on your mind that you have not dared to speak to anyone else. Write them down. Ask them out loud. Whatever

it takes, just get the questions out in the open, even if just for yourself.

The theme of these exercises is to keep talking with God. He wants a relationship with you; keep your end of the relationship open. Don't try to escape prematurely from the pain in which you find yourself. Begin now, every day, to do your best to accept whatever new reality in which you find yourself.

TRAUMA OFTEN DISRUPTS A PERSON'S FAITH IN GOD.

AT TIMES, IT EVEN CAUSES PEOPLE TO FEEL AS THOUGH THEY HAVE LOST THEIR FAITH IN GOD ALTOGETHER.

Making Friends with Darkness joins the ongoing conversation about PTSD and moral injury recovery with an approach from the Scriptures. This plan is non-formulaic and helps people heal from their trauma and remove barriers to God.

Nick Hamilton offers a unique walk through the psalms and other Scriptures with an invitation to wrestle with your questions and to wrestle with God along the way. It is a companion in the deepest and most difficult moments of life. *Making Friends with Darkness* hopes to "bind up the brokenhearted," walking with those who experience trauma and loss.



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