

December 1, 2024

PRAISING AND TRUSTING GOD DURING TIMES OF GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT

Psalm 89

(5 of 9 in a series of selected Psalms)

Have you ever read a book or watched a movie in which you find yourself saying, “Wow, I didn’t see it taking that turn?” That’s the response that reading Psalm 89 elicits as well. For the first thirty-seven verses of the psalm, it reads like a praise psalm. The psalmist declares that he will sing of God’s steadfast love and make his faithfulness known. Then, he establishes all the reasons he will sing of God’s faithful love by declaring the greatness of God’s nature and acts before focusing on the glorious promises God made to David when he declared that the Davidic line would be an everlasting dynasty, reigning over his people. But then you come to verse 38, and you think, “Wait. What?”

Whereas the psalmist has spent thirty-seven verses talking about God’s faithfulness to his promises and specifically his promise to ensure one of David’s sons is always on the throne, verses 38-39 read, “But now you have cast off and rejected; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust.” He’s basically declaring that God has gone back on all those promises he celebrates in the first half of the psalm. It’s jarring and shocking. So what’s going on?

Well, a couple of things are going on. First, it is true that God made a covenant with David that he would always have a son (a descendent) reigning on his throne. We heard that in the reading of 2 Samuel 7:8-17. This covenant is rehearsed in verses 19-37 of our psalm. We get a taste of what God promised there, when the psalmist repeats God’s promises in verses 28-29, writing, “My steadfast love I will keep for him forever, and my covenant will stand firm for him. I will establish his offspring forever and his throne as the day of heavens.” Moreover, whereas after Saul sinned, the Lord stripped the throne from him, the Lord declared that when David’s sons sin, though he’ll discipline them, he won’t remove his steadfast love from them. He won’t go back on his covenant. Again, we read of this in verses 30-37, “If his children forsake my law . . . and do not keep my commandments, then I will punish their transgression with the rod . . . but I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant. . . . I will not lie to David. His offspring shall endure forever, his throne as long as the sun before me. Like the moon it shall be established forever, a faithful witness in the skies.”

Now, when you hear that, is there anything that suggests there may come a day when David has no descendant on the throne? Is there anything that suggests that God’s promise to establish this Davidic dynasty is a temporary reality? Of course not. In fact, I don’t know how the Lord could have said more strongly that David will have a son reigning on his throne forever more clearly than he did here. And yet, in 587-586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, hauling off Jehoiachin into exile, leaving no son of David reigning on the throne.

That, it seems, is when the psalmist wrote Psalm 89. He speaks of the walls of the city being breached in verse 40, which would have happened in the Babylonian conquest. And he speaks of the mockery in verse 51, which would have accompanied that event as well.

So, after the Babylonian conquest and exile of the people, the psalmist looks around, and it looks like God has gone back on his promises. It looks like God has violated his covenant. There is no Davidic king. There's not really any kingdom to speak of. And, what makes it worse, is that this is all the work of God's hands. That's clear in the psalmist's mind. That's why he doesn't say, "The Babylonians have overcome us." Rather, he says, "But now *you* have cast off and rejected; *you* are full of wrath against your anointed. *You* have renounced the covenant with your servant; *you* have defiled his crown in the dust. *You* have breached all his walls; *you* have laid the strongholds in ruins" (vv. 38-40). It's not just that God allowed the promises not to come to pass; it seems that he has actively ensured that his promises are violated. It looks like he's broken the covenant.

You can imagine, then, the confusion that the psalmist feels in this moment. He thought he knew how this would work out, based on God's very promises. And it hasn't. The scene around him was an unimaginable thought to him. What does this mean? How does he even move forward?

Well, perhaps you've been there or even are there now. Maybe you're suffering in ways you didn't see coming, and it even feels to you like the Lord has not shown his faithfulness to you in the way you anticipated. How do you sustain your soul in these times? Even more, how do you find yourself able to praise God in these moments? What should your prayers look like? What do you hold on to in order to walk in hope? I think Psalm 89 gives us the answers. Specifically I want to note four truths we see from this psalm. The first is you can praise him for his nature, ways, and actions, even in moments of disappointment.

You can praise God for his nature, ways, and actions, even in moments of disappointment

As you start Psalm 89, it's important to recognize that there is no hint that this psalm was written in two settings or is the combination of two different psalms. What I mean is that there's no evidence that the psalmist wrote verses 1-37, and then sometimes after the fall of Jerusalem took up the pen again and added verses 38-52, which sound like a lament psalm. Nor is there any evidence that he just put together a praise psalm and a lament psalm he'd written. Rather, Psalm 89 is one psalm, written by one author, in one setting. Why is this important?

The reason this is important for us to recognize is that what it means is that when the psalmist wrote verses 1-37, he wrote them with the reality that provoke verses 38-52 in his mind. He wrote it after Jerusalem had been conquered, after the king in David's line had been hauled away, and after it looked like God had gone back on everything he promised in his covenant with David. And yet he begins the psalm by declaring God's praise. He writes, "I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations" (v. 1). In verse 5 he asks the heavens to join in this praise to the Lord, writing, "Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones."

But how? How is he able to begin on that note and praise God amidst all the questions about what God is doing in this moment? How is he able to exalt the Lord when it looks like the Lord has cast aside all of his promises to David?

The answer, it seems, is that he's praising God for his nature, ways, and actions—things that are always true no matter what lies before the psalmist. Notice that in verses 6-8, he notes that no being in all of creation is as great, awesome, mighty, and faithful as the Lord. That's who God is. In verses 9-14, he declares God's ways and actions. He notes that God rules the sea, crushed Egypt and delivered his people (represented with the image of Rahab), that he reigns over heaven and earth as the one who created them, that he is strong, that he is right and just in all that he does, and that he exercises faithful love toward his people. He praises God for what God has revealed in his Word and through his actions that he is. This is true of God, even if the psalmist can't make sense of the scene before him.

This is an avenue to praise for us as well. In the midst of your marriage falling apart, or your child walking astray, or having to drop out of school because you can't pay for the next semester, what's true about God is always true about God. When you find yourself facing the unspeakable tragedy of losing a child, receiving that Alzheimer's diagnosis, or watching a loved one sabotage his life through terrible decisions—and each of those are indeed unspeakably painful—it is still true that God is great, good, powerful, loving, righteous, faithful, and more. It's still true that he sent his Son to lay down his life for his sheep and that he'll raise us up on the last day. And these realities of who God is and what he has done are sufficient realities to draw us to praise him—even in the midst of pain and sorrow so deep it feels like it's going to kill us. That's what we see at the beginning of this psalm. You can praise God for his nature, ways, and actions, even in the midst of darkest disappointment.

Additionally, I want to mention something right along this point that we can recognize in this psalm as well. You can meditate on truths about God to sustain and anchor your soul in times of darkness.

You can meditate on truths about God to sustain and anchor your soul in times of darkness

One interesting note in this psalm is how much specifically the psalmist forces himself to meditate on specific truths of Scripture. I've already noted how verses 5-14 speak of how great and glorious God's nature, ways, and actions are. Well, he doesn't stop there. In verses 15-18, he focuses on the fact that God is not only great and glorious but that he chose to commit himself to a specific people, Israel. Notice in verse 15 how he focuses on God's "people" and in verses 16-18 celebrates the exaltation of God's people because of God's commitment to them. And yet, all of this is a narrowing to the main focus of the first half of the psalm as in verses 19-37 the psalmist zeroes in on God's covenant and covenant promises to David.

In these verses, the psalmist writes down nearly every detail of the Davidic covenant. He could've shorthanded it a bit if he'd wanted. After all, people who are reading it would've known

what he was referring to. Other psalms do this all the time. Earlier in this psalm you see this. Verses 9-10 seem to be a reference to the Lord judging the Egyptians and delivering his people as “Rahab” is a reference to this mythical creature who opposes the Lord and represents Egypt. So, if the psalmist is clearly capable of summarizing a much larger narrative, why does he go into every detail of the Davidic covenant in verses 19-37? He mentions the fact that God told David he would establish his line as a dynasty, that his sons would be sons of God (v. 26), that the king from David’s line would be the highest of the kings of earth (v. 27), that the covenant would last forever (v. 28), that the Lord would not remove his line as he did Saul’s, even when David’s descendants sin (vv. 30-33), and that the Lord deems these promises as forever binding (vv. 36-37). So, again, why rehearse every detail of the Davidic covenant?

I think the answer is that in the face of the travesty he’s witnessing and the questions it raises, he’s meditating on God’s truths in detail so that he might sustain and anchor his soul. After all, this is what the psalms often do. It’s most often in reverse. Typically, we see the psalmist express all his pain, confusion, and doubt and then declare, “But I know this to be true.” Here, the psalmist starts with what he knows before he moves on to his lament. He painstakingly reminds himself of every detail of what is true and of what God promised because this is the only thing he has to sustain himself and anchor his soul as he looks out and sees what looks like God violating his covenant promises.

We, too, must mimic this practice. Dark and difficult moments have been known to shake people to their core. You can probably even think of someone who seemed to be following the Lord and then a tragedy came their way, and now they’ve walked away. How do we keep that from being us? How do we sustain ourselves and anchor our souls so that we are not shaken to the point of being moved? We meditate on the truths of Scripture. Regardless of what he sees before him, which he’ll describe in verses 38-52, what he’s rehearsing in his mind in verses 19-37 is true. That is instructive for us.

But the psalmist doesn’t stop with meditating on God’s Word. He prays God’s promises back to him, and we must as well. You should fill your prayers with God’s promises.

You should fill your prayers with God’s promises

In verses 38-45 the psalmist details the tragedy around him that seems to suggest the Lord has gone back on his covenant. And so in verses 46-52, he asks the Lord to act. His requests are simply that the Lord would remember, which we see in verse 50, for example. But, as we know, asking the Lord to remember isn’t asking him to call something to his mind and not forget it. That’s acting as if God is like us. No, asking God to remember is asking him to act. The psalmist is asking God to be true to his promises and make right the situation before him. But what I want us to see as well is that this prayer is based upon the nature of God that he’s rehearsed in verses 1-18 and the promises of God that he’s spelled out in verses 19-37. In other words, the truths rehearsed in verses 1-37 form the foundation for his request for God to act in verses 46-52.

One of the most transformative things that can happen with our prayers is that we begin to align them with God's promises. Now, I'm not saying that we can't pray and ask God to do things that he hasn't promised. We certainly can. It's perfectly proper to ask for healing or a spouse or a child or the like, even though none of these things are promised to us. But too many times we solely pray for those things at the expense of praying in line with what God has promised.

Don Carson tells a story of his wife being at a conference where they got news that one of the ladies had her cancer return. The doctors seemed to have concluded there was nothing more to be done, and this bout of cancer would likely take her life outside of a miracle of God. And so as the ladies started praying for this dear sister, they all boldly asked for the Lord to heal her. Then it was Don's wife's turn to pray. Carson writes, "My wife, who has almost lost her life twice to cancer, when it was her turn to pray . . . said, 'Dear heavenly Father, we would so much appreciate it if you would heal dear Mary, and we dare to ask you that. But if not, teach her to die well. Give her confidence in the risen Christ. Give her a testimony for her husband and children. Give her delight in the Lord and the prospect of a new heaven and new earth. Fill her with joy in believing.'"¹

Now, it may well be that the Lord healed this woman. I don't know. But do you feel the power of praying in line with what God has revealed his will to be? God has promised that he'll complete the work he began in his children. He's promised he'll make us like his Son. He's promised that he'll not forsake us but strengthen us to persevere. That's what Mrs. Carson was praying. She was praying in line with God's promises.

Can you imagine the encouragement these ladies would have felt as they saw this woman strengthened to finish well, testifying to the gospel before her family in her final days, looking forward to an eternity that the Son of God was going to welcome her into, while being filled with joy and peace that defied any understanding? That's the power and beauty of praying in line with what God has revealed to us that he wants to do. It's the power of letting our prayers be guided by God's promises.

Finally, I want us to see two realities as we close that I hope will encourage us in our prayers. First, the Lord does not always answer within our envisioned timetable.

Recognize, as you pray, that the Lord will not always answer within your envisioned timetable

I say this because as the psalmist cried out for God to "remember" as he does in verse 50, which is a call for God to do something, notice how he sets it within a timeframe. He says in verse 47, "Remember how short my time is! For what vanity you have created all the children of man!" The psalmist is telling the Lord that he doesn't have much time to answer this request in the timetable that the psalmist desires. The psalmist wants God to restore Jerusalem, restore the

¹ This story can be found at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/sermon/part-3-pray-in-line-with-the-mind-of-god-ephesians-3-14-21/>. Accessed November 25, 2024.

Davidic king, judge his enemies, and set everything right again. And he wants the Lord to do this within his lifetime, since he likely doesn't have a ton of time left. The psalmist says to the Lord, "I need you to do this, and I need you to do it soon."

Now, we know that the Lord did raise up Cyrus eventually, and he did commission the Jews to go back and rebuild the temple and walls of the city. But that decree came fifty years later. And my guess is, though we can't be certain, that the psalmist had died by that point. And so he might have died thinking his prayer wasn't answered when, in reality, it just wasn't answered in line with his envisioned timetable.

We are so limited in our understanding, that it may well be that the Lord ordains our prayers as a means through which he will carry out his purposes after our lives on this earth have ended. So do not grow weary in the good work of praying. It may be that the Lord is going to answer your prayer, just not when you're able to see it. But I want to end with one more encouraging note. Recognize that God's ultimate plan is glorious.

Recognize that God's ultimate plan is glorious

I've acted as if all that the psalmist prayed for was the restoration of the temple and the city, but that's not quite right, is it? He also wanted David's dynasty restored. You see, God had promised that David would always have a son on the throne of his kingdom. And, as we've noted multiple times, there are only two ways this promise can be fulfilled. Either David has a son who replaces him upon his death who has a son who replaces him upon his death, so on and so forth, world without end. Or David has a Son who lives and reigns forever.

After the Babylonian conquest of Judah, it looks like option one is no longer an option. That's the setting of this psalm as we see in verses 19-37. As the psalmist here laments, there is no longer a Davidic son on the throne. It looked like God had broken his covenant promise. But one day, a baby from David's line was born in Bethlehem, and he was God's promised king. He was the clear fulfillment of all that God had promised. Here was God's perfect king who came to live and reign forever.

But, like Psalm 89, one day those who hoped and trusted in God's promises, doubted. One Friday afternoon, his followers looked upon Jesus' dying body as he was hanging on a cross and, no doubt, thought, "God, you have cast off and rejected him; you are full of wrath against your anointed" (v. 38). But the reality was that God was doing something more glorious than they could have imagined. He was indeed allowing his king to bear wrath, but he was merely paying the penalty for our sins so that we might be forgiven. And on the third day, God raised up his Son from the dead, showing that he is indeed his promised king who lives and reigns forever.

In one sense, Easter Sunday morning was an answer to the prayer of the psalmist in Psalm 89. God was showing himself faithful to his covenant promises, and he was doing it in a more glorious way that the psalmist could have every imagined. That's who our God is. And we know where history is going. There'll be a new heavens and new earth one day where we will dwell

with our God forever. So keep praising God, even in your sorrow. Keep rehearsing his promises to your heart and mind. Keep praying in line with his promises. And keep recognizing that though he may not answer in our timetable, his ultimate answer will be more glorious than we could ever imagine. So let's give thanks to him now as we come to the table. Amen.