

A Prayer For God To Remember

Psalm 89

David Sunday December 27, 2020

Patrick was slated to preach our last sermon in the “God So Loved” series, but he is now sick and we ask you to pray for him. He’s getting through this okay, but he says it’s not pleasant. So pray for Patrick. I’ll be pinch-hitting this morning with a different sermon than we had planned.

I’d like you to turn in your Bibles to Psalm 89. This is a Psalm you’re going to need to have open before you as I preach. We’re going to do it the old-fashioned way, where we open our Bibles—or open the app on a phone. It’s a lengthy Psalm, so I’d like to anchor our thoughts by reading a portion from the beginning, the middle and the end to get a flavor of what’s happening here in this Psalm. Beginning with Psalm 89:1-4, Ethan the Ezrahite, who wrote this Psalm, declares his resolution to praise the Lord:

*¹ I will sing about the LORD’s faithful love forever;
I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations
with my mouth.*

*² For I will declare,
“Faithful love is built up forever;
you establish your faithfulness in the heavens.”*

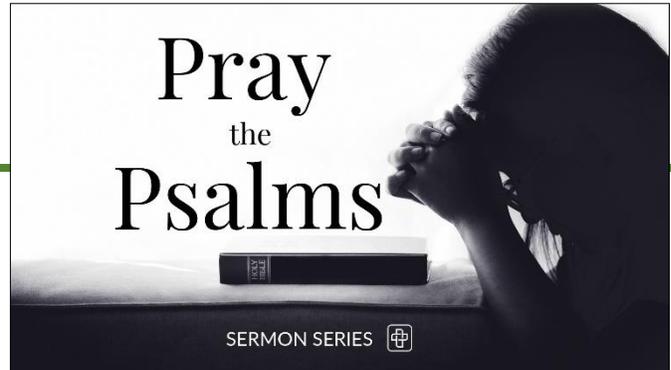
*³ The LORD said,
“I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
I have sworn an oath to David my servant:*

*⁴ ‘I will establish your offspring forever
and build up your throne for all generations.’”*

Now let’s skip down to verses 38 and 39; notice the change of tone:

*³⁸ But you have spurned and rejected him;
you have become enraged with your anointed.*

*³⁹ You have repudiated the covenant with your servant;
you have completely dishonored his crown.*



Then finally in verses 46-52, a lament and then a word of praise:

*⁴⁶ How long, LORD? Will you hide forever?
Will your anger keep burning like fire?
⁴⁷ Remember how short my life is.
Have you created everyone for nothing?
⁴⁸ What courageous person can live and never see death?
Who can save himself from the power of Sheol?
⁴⁹ Lord, where are the former acts of your faithful love
that you swore to David in your faithfulness?
⁵⁰ Remember, Lord, the ridicule against your servants—
in my heart I carry abuse from all the peoples—
⁵¹ how your enemies have ridiculed, LORD,
how they have ridiculed every step of your anointed.*

*⁵² Blessed be the LORD forever.
Amen and amen.*

When my son was just a boy, I promised to take him hiking in the Grand Canyon. I actually put a timeframe on the promise, stating, “We will do this while George W. Bush is still President of the United States.” Well, the time was drawing short and I ended up having to replace that promise with another promise. In January of 2009 when there were about three weeks left in Bush’s presidency, I took my son with me on a trip to Uganda. We went on a safari while we were there and saw rhinoceroses, lions and all kinds of exotic creatures. I don’t think he was disappointed. I felt pretty good about replacing the promise. But Nate kept reminding me throughout his teenage years, “Dad, remember, we’re going to go hiking in the Grand Canyon.” So finally in 2017, when he was 21 years old, I took him down into the canyon and we had a great time hiking there.

I wonder, have you ever felt like God has forgotten His promise to you? Have you ever expected something from God and felt disappointed? Tim and Kathy Keller write about our expectations controlling how we interpret our experiences. If, before you walk into a room, you’re told, “This is a prison cell,” you may actually think, “Well, this is pretty nice.” But if before you walk into that same room you are told, “This is a honeymoon suite,” you may respond, “What a dump.” Expectations control how we interpret our experience.

In Psalm 89, one of our ancient fathers in the faith—Ethan the Ezrahite—comes alongside and is teaching us how to grapple with God when it seems like there’s a chasm between what He’s promised and what we’re actually experiencing. As we learn to cry out to

God like Ethan, the Holy Spirit is going to be forming us into the kind of people who learn how to walk by faith and not by sight (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The specific promise Ethan has in mind is the covenant God made with David, years before Ethan wrote this Psalm, that David's throne and kingdom would endure forever. But Ethan is writing this at a time when David's throne has been overturned, his crown is lying in the dust and his kingdom is a vassal state. The expectations of God's people for this golden age of messianic splendor that would continue forever have been crushed, and they're now resident aliens under a hostile foreign power.

It's like Ethan is now saying to the Lord, "Have You forgotten Your promises?" Ethan is probably a contemporary of Jeremiah and the king in David's line is being held as a prisoner in a foreign land, like happened to Jeconiah and Zedekiah. Ethan's giving voice to this heartache, this disappointment, that God's people were experiencing during their time of exile. He's asking questions we're sometimes afraid to vocalize and resisting the urge to give easy answers.

I'm really glad God's Word is honest like this. I'm glad God doesn't scrub out portions of Scripture like this Psalm. If I were inventing a religion, I'd probably want to make it look like my people are happy all the time. But God is a Father Who invites us to be honest with Him in our pain. He's not into image management. He's not on a marketing campaign to make it look like everyone who follows Him is happy all the time. He invites us to come to Him honestly with our disappointment. He loves to hear us remind Him, "Father, You promised. Don't forget Your Word to us."

This Psalm divides neatly into two contrasting sections. First, we're going to look at the conviction of faith in verses 1-37, then at the contradiction of experience in the rest of the Psalm.

The conviction of faith (Psalm 89:1-37)

We saw in the first two verses how the Psalm focuses on two key attributes of God that form the backbone of His covenant relationship with His people.

First, His steadfast love—the famous word *chesed* that speaks of God's covenant love, faithfulness and loyalty. It's so rich that Ethan speaks of this word in the plural in verse one: "*I will sing about the Lord's faithful love forever...*" It's really plural—His faithful loves, mercies and loving kindnesses. This word appears in the plural form again in verse 49, plus in between there are five appearances of this word for God's steadfast love.

The second word is His faithfulness, which we find in verse two—God's trustworthiness in fulfilling all His obligations and His promises. He says in verse two, "*...you establish your*

faithfulness in the heavens.” We have here God’s steadfast love and God’s faithfulness—the covenant He revealed to Moses and His character He revealed to Moses. He is full of steadfast love and faithfulness.

As you fast forward in the Bible to the Gospel of John, John 1:14 says, “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory...full of grace and truth*” (NKJV). Those are the same words in the Greek that the Hebrews used to speak of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness.

At the beginning of this Psalm, Ethan is resolving with all his might, no matter what the circumstances are, despite all appearances to the contrary, “I have made up my mind that I’m going to sing. I’m going to proclaim and declare the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Lord forever.” And we will do the same, here at the end of this year of disappointed expectations.

I received two texts from friends on Christmas day, both of whom are believers and both are suffering profoundly. One is pleading with God to heal her husband as he is on a ventilator and fighting for his life with COVID. The other is dealing with the heartache of longing for the emotional healing of an adult child whose troubles seem unrelenting. In both texts, these friends expressed their confidence that even when things seem to be looking dire, God is faithful. His faithful love is woven into the fabric of the ups and downs of our lives.

So in our longing and darkness, we can sing of the Lord’s steadfast love and His faithfulness forever. In verse two, Ethan declares that God’s “*faithful love is built up forever.*” That verb “built up” echoes the promise God made to King David that one of his sons would build a house for God’s name, that the Lord would establish David’s kingdom forever. That’s in 2 Samuel 7.

In verses three and four of this Psalm, Ethan summarizes in a nutshell this covenant promise that God made to David. This is the reason why he’s going to declare God’s faithfulness to all generations. Even though Ethan cannot presently see how God is going to fulfill His promise to give David an everlasting kingdom, his question is not if God is going to fulfill the promise, but when. He’s confident in God’s ability to fulfill this promise because of Who God is.

As we look at verses 5-14, we see the psalmist grounding his faith in God’s promise-keeping character. He’s extolling God’s supremacy in heaven and His sovereignty on earth.

⁵ *LORD, the heavens praise your wonders—
your faithfulness also—
in the assembly of the holy ones.*

⁶ *For who in the skies can compare with the LORD?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD?*

⁷ *God is greatly feared in the council of the holy ones,*

more awe-inspiring than all who surround him.
⁸ *LORD God of Armies,*
who is strong like you, LORD?
Your faithfulness surrounds you.

In other words, “Wherever You go in heaven or on earth, Lord, You bring Your faithfulness with You.” In verse five, the word “wonders” is actually a singular noun. He’s speaking of a particular wonder, a specific wonder, for which he is praising God. That wonder is God’s promise to the seed of David. This promise is so central in the Bible because it establishes a line all the way back to Genesis 3:15 when God promised Adam—after Adam plunged the world into futility and misery through his sin—that God was going to raise up an offspring from Adam’s wife who was going to crush the serpent’s head and bring to end the enmity that now existed between creation and its Maker.

Then from Genesis 3:15, the promise carries forward to Abram, when God makes a covenant with him that through his offspring all the peoples of the earth will experience blessing. Then that promise carries forward and finds its focus in David. God says, “I’m going to raise up an eternal kingdom for David and I’m going to bring salvation to the world.”

In Biblical Theology, Jim Hamilton explains that “God’s promise to David is nothing less than the world’s last best hope, the world’s only hope for redemption, restoration and the achievement of every good purpose.” That’s how important this covenant with David is. It’s nothing less than the world’s last best hope. So Ethan is very much wanting God to fulfill that promise, so he celebrates the almighty power of God to do that by focusing on His sovereignty over all creation in verses 9-12.

Verse nine says, “*You rule the raging sea; when its waves surge, you still them.*” Then in verse ten he says, “*You crushed Rahab like one who is slain...*” Here, Rahab is a nickname of scorn for Egypt. At the heart of the history of God’s people stands the miraculous deliverance from bondage in Egypt, and this came through the almighty power of God Who rules the raging sea, who stills its waves, who crushes Pharaoh and his armies in the deluge, and who scatters the enemies of God’s people with His powerful arm. Ethan is saying here, “There’s nothing in the heavens above or in the earth below that can defeat the sovereign reign and purposes of God. Even the mountains, both high and low, acclaim His majestic name.”

He comes to a crescendo in this section in verse 14, where he says, “*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; faithful love and truth go before you.*” What’s going on here is an example of what we mean when we say, “Our God reigns,” when we worship Him

as supreme. What we are seeing is that God is perfect in righteousness, His practices are consistently just, covenant love and faithfulness go with Him wherever He goes, heralding His way.

If any of these qualities were lacking in God, then we could explain logically why God's people suffer. For instance, in the words of Alec Motyer:

We could say that God is strong and righteous in all He does, but He's not always loving. Or we could say He is righteous and loving, but not always strong enough to do what He wants. Or we could say God is loving and strong, but He's not always righteous. In any of those three ways, we could explain why God's people suffer inexplicably.

But the truth of the Bible is that God is always all three of these things. He's always full of almighty strength, always holy in His righteousness, always changeless in His love. So we have to learn how to face life without explanations, trusting in Him rather than relying on our own logic. That's what we do when we come to worship. Even though we're still groaning in labor, even though we're still waiting for the fulfillment of some of God's promises, we focus on His character, His almighty strength, His holy righteousness, His changeless love, and that we are going to face life with faith rather than with explanations. We're going to sing about His love and faithfulness.

While studying this Psalm, I was reminded of our dear friend Jan Stern, who several of us knew before she went home to be with the Lord six years ago in her mid-50s. In those years, as Jan was struggling with cancer, she taught us how to do what the psalmist is doing by adopting as her rule of life: "Gaze at God; glance at circumstances." That's what Jan did. She gazed at God and learned to glance at her circumstances. She learned to fix her eyes, not on what she could see, but on the unseen realities that God has revealed of Himself in His Word. We don't believe because we understand everything; we believe in order to understand. When we focus on God's power, righteousness and love—even though we don't understand our suffering—we are reminded that an infinite God has reasons that our finite minds cannot comprehend.

So with joy we join God's people in worship week after week and see them putting into practice verses 15 through 18. Look at what it says there: "*Happy are the people who know the joyful shout...*" Happy are the people who are being called to worship this God.

^{15b} *They walk in the light from your face.*

¹⁶ *They rejoice in your name all day long,*

and they are exalted by your righteousness.

*¹⁷ For you are their magnificent strength;
by your favor our horn is exalted.*

*¹⁸ Surely our shield belongs to the LORD,
our king to the Holy One of Israel.*

This is why we gather for worship week after week. We don't come just for an experience or to be entertained. We come to rehearse God's mighty acts of salvation in worship and celebrate the fact that we walk in this dark world by the light that comes from His face. We rejoice in His name all day long because we know that our Savior is leading us all the way. He's cheering each winding path we tread. He's giving us strength for every trial. He's pouring out on us the fullness of His love.

In the mind of Ethan, this joyous confidence is grounded in the fact that God made a covenant with David. He gave His people a horn, it says, which is a symbol of strength in battle, a shield, which is a source of protection, and a king who rules over them under the sovereign grace of God. All this is bringing us to the molten core of this Psalm. It's a core that provides heat to the praises that precede it and results in this eruption of lament in the section that's going to follow.

Verses 19-37 recount God's choice of David and the covenant God made to David's line. It's because of this covenant that Ethan has been resolute in singing and proclaiming God's faithfulness; it will be because of this covenant that he cries out in anguish later. Look at verse 20. As Ethan begins recounting the covenant God made with David, he uses this crucial word, "servant." *"I have found David, my servant; I have anointed him with my sacred oil."*

Ethan is going to wrestle in this Psalm with how it can be that God's chosen, anointed servant is suffering. As the story of redemption unfolds, this enigma of a king who is a suffering servant becomes the centerpiece of the plot of this story. The next nine verses resound with the glory of God's covenant with His chosen king. As you scan verses 21 through 29, look for these three dominating notes:

- the king's strength and victory
- his intimate relationship with God, as a son to a father
- the everlasting duration of this king's reign

Pay attention to what Ethan is doing in verses 21-29 as he models for us a practice that needs to be woven into our own interactions with the Lord and into our own prayer life. He's reminding God of His promises. He's saying, "God, You said You'd always be with Your king.

God, You promised to strengthen him, crush his foes, extend his reign and make him the greatest of the kings. You promised to answer him with help whenever he calls on You and preserve his reign forever.” These promises culminate in verses 28 and 29, where God says, “*I will always preserve my faithful love for him, and my covenant with him will endure. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as heaven lasts.*”

Do you know what it’s like to pray the way Ethan is doing here in this Psalm? Do you remind God of His promises in your prayers? Sometimes we become disillusioned with God because we are expecting things from Him that He never promised to be or do. We bring our own agenda, our own desires to God, then we get angry with Him because He’s not doing what we want Him to do. But that’s not what Ethan is doing here in this Psalm. He’s going straight into the Scripture. He’s going straight into 2 Samuel 7, saying, “Lord, remember. Lord, this is what You have said.”

Then he goes on in verses 30-37 to praise God that His oath and His covenant are so strong that even human sin cannot defeat it. He reminds God that He said even if David’s sons abandoned Him, He would discipline them, but He would not remove His covenant from David. Look at verses 35-37:

³⁵ *Once and for all
I have sworn an oath by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.*
³⁶ *His offspring will continue forever,
his throne like the sun before me,
³⁷ like the moon, established forever,
a faithful witness in the sky.*

Ethan is saying, “God, Your covenant, Your promises, are as solid and abiding as creation itself. It’s like the sun and moon established forever; that’s what You have said You will make David’s throne to be.” That word “forever” is central to this Psalm, repeated nine times. So when we feel like God is not fulfilling His promises in our lives, we can follow Ethan’s example. We can remind God of His eternal Word which abides forever.

In the words of Lindsey Tollefson, “We glorify God when we remind Him of His Word. It shows Him that we believe what He said and that our faith in His Word is strong.”

The contradiction of experience (Psalm 89:38-52)

It’s precisely because he’s been expressing his faith in God’s Word for 37 verses that Ethan can now express such bewilderment in the second half of this Psalm. We need to

understand the heat, feel the heat, of the faith that Ethan has in order to understand the vehemence of the eruption that happens beginning in verse 38. Here's where we come to the second part of the Psalm, the contradiction of experience.

Walking by faith, not by sight, does not mean we ignore the circumstances in our lives that are disappointing. It does not mean we just squash our frustrations and pretend they don't exist. What it means is that we cry out to God when we're living in the gap between what He has promised and what we're actually experiencing. We lament before Him. That's what Ethan is teaching us to do in this section.

You see, as you look over at verses 38 and following that all the joy of the first 37 verses is evaporating. It's like a fog of confusion is just enveloping the atmosphere. If you look at verses 38 through 45, you'll see the contrast between the affirmations of God's sovereignty that were in the beginning and now all these verbs that describe God's destructive actions, contradicting the promises He has made. We read things like this:

³⁸ *But you have spurned and rejected him;
you have become enraged with your anointed.*
³⁹ *You have repudiated the covenant with your servant;
you have completely dishonored his crown...*
⁴⁴ *You have made his splendor cease
and have overturned his throne.*
⁴⁵ *You have shortened the days of his youth;
you have covered him with shame.*

We've gone from the promise of victory to the experience of defeat, from an eternal throne to an overturned kingdom, from glory and splendor to utter shame. This dissonance between the promise and the reality could not be harsher. Ethan is lamenting with an anguish that's longing for resolution. For him, this is deeply personal. If God doesn't keep His promises to King David, then God's people have no hope in the face of death.

For us too, the stakes are high, for the entirety of God's plan to save the world hinges on His promise to place a King on David's throne Who will reign forever. If God's covenant with David vanishes, so does our only comfort in life and death. So we can resonate with this lament we heard Ethan pouring out to God in verses 46 through 51. He's longing for God to turn things around in his lifetime. He knows his days are short. He knows his death is coming. He knows he cannot save himself from the grave, so his hope lies in God's faithfulness to His covenant.

This anguish that starts to pour forth from his mouth in verse 46—*"How long, Lord?"*—is pulsating with hope. He's persuaded that God is going to act. It's not a question of whether

God will fulfill His covenant, but when. So in verse 49 he cries out of the depths of his heart for God to remember His former acts of faithful love. This again is the plural form of that verb *chesed*.

It's unthinkable for him to believe that a God of such abounding mercy would hide forever and forget to be faithful to the covenant He made to David. But he can't see how the desolation they're currently going through is going to end. He's looking through a clouded lens and the telescope of his faith can only faintly glimpse how this is going to be resolved. His anguish is crying out for an answer that only the gospel of Jesus Christ can give.

So here we are, 2,020 years after God sends the answer to Ethan's prayer. We saw the answer to Ethan's prayer spring up like a root out of dry ground (Isaiah 53:2). We, the people who are walking in darkness, have seen a great light (Isaiah 9:2). We know that the yoke of those who oppress the king on David's throne has been shattered (Isaiah 9:4) because we've seen the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 9:6: *"For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."*

We often forget the next words of this great statement. It says, *"The dominion will be vast, and its prosperity will never end. He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from now on and forever. The zeal of the LORD of Armies will accomplish this"* (Isaiah 9:7).

What we celebrate at Christmas is that the zeal of the Lord of Armies has accomplished this. We have heard the words of the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary in Luke 1:31-33, where he said, *"Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end."*

We have heard the angels over the skies in Bethlehem heralding the good news to the shepherds there, saying to them, *"Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord"* (Luke 2:10-11). Jesus is the shoot that grows from the stump of Jesse, David's father, and He is the fruitful branch from its roots (Isaiah 11:1).

But how did we treat Him—this Servant, this Anointed One—when He came into the world? He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with suffering.

He was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities, punishment for our peace was on Him, yet we are healed by His wounds (Isaiah 53:3-5).

Thank the Lord the story doesn't end there. Yes, the Lord was pleased to crush His Servant severely, but He did not suffer in vain. In Romans 1 we learn that all the promises God made through His prophets in the holy Scriptures ultimately find their fulfillment in the good news concerning His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, Who was a descendent of David according to the flesh and was appointed to be the powerful Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead.

In the fifth chapter of the book of Revelation, we see that Jesus is able to bring the history of redemption to its grand finale. Jesus is able to bring all things to the end when weeping will cease, when everything sad will come untrue, when heaven and earth will resound with jubilation, *“Look, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so that he is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”*

We can rejoice in the answer to Ethan's prayer, but we can also learn from Ethan's example and imitate his faith—because we're walking by faith and not by sight, still waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises in the return of our King, the Lord Jesus Christ. As we gather week by week to hear the joyful sound of the gospel as it's proclaimed in the Word and portrayed in the sacraments, we walk in the light from His face and wait for the fulfillment of His promises.

We're crying out, with His church, “How long, Lord? How long until You come?” We rejoice in His promise at the end of the Bible, *“I am coming soon”* (Revelation 22:7, 12, 20). I love how an old preacher named Francis Grimke put it. “He might not come when you want Him, but He's always on time.”

In the meantime, no matter how mean these times become, there is enough for us in the gospel to taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8) on the worst day of our lives. There's enough for us in the gospel of Jesus to taste and see that the Lord is good for our friend whose husband is on a ventilator. There's enough for us in the gospel to taste and see that the Lord is good when we're experiencing the mental, physical and spiritual anguish of what our children are going through. There's enough for us to taste and see in the gospel that the Lord is good when we're living in a loveless marriage, when we're losing our physical strength and mobility, when we have to surrender freedoms that others take for granted. In the season of your darkest desolation, in the moment when you feel most crushed, most rejected, look to Christ, Who

condescended, Who came down, Who took on flesh, Who bore our humanity in all its weakness in order to ransom us.

Behold your King, Who is gentle and lowly in His beauty. There's light streaming from Jesus' face. There is indestructible life running through His glorified veins for healing of all who will look to Him and live. And *“when Christ, who is your life, appears, you also will appear with him in glory”* (Colossians 3;4).

I think a Psalm like this, written hundreds of years before the coming of Christ, teaches us an important lesson of faith. There are promises made to us, the fulfillment of which we will only see when we finally see Jesus face to face. But when we see Him, we will not find a single promise God has made left unfulfilled. Every promise God has ever made finds its “Yes” in Jesus Christ.

In fact, we're not only going to find that God has met every promise He has made, but we are going to find that He has exceedingly, abundantly over-fulfilled every promise He's ever made to us in Christ, more than we could ever ask or imagine. So let's fix our eyes on this great son of David, our resurrected King, and let's say with Ethan the Ezrahite, *“Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen and amen.”* Let's bow before Him as we bring our needs to Him.

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