

When God doesn't keep His Promises

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like you to turn to our reading for this evening, which is from Psalm 89. Psalm 89, it's on page 495 in the Church Bibles.

Now, this is quite a long psalm, and I thought what I'd do is read it in sections with just one or two observations at the beginning of each section to kind of outline what's going on there, so that we're able to follow the logic of it as we go through.

This is a psalm that comes from towards the end of the Old Testament history, as will become clear later in the evening. We'll start with the introductory section, verses 1 to 4.

And this first little section is an introduction in praise of God's faithfulness, and it features God's covenant with David, his chosen king.

A mascal of Ethan the Ezraite, I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord forever. With my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations.

[1 : 11] For I said, steadfast love will be built up forever. In the heavens you will establish your faithfulness. You have said, I have made a covenant with my chosen one.

I have sworn to David my servant. I will establish your offspring forever and build your throne for all generations.

The next section is about God's supremacy. There is nowhere, no one, anywhere, anything like him. Verse 5.

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones. For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord?

Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord, a God greatly to be feared in the counsel of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him? O Lord God of hosts, Who is mighty as you are, O Lord, with your faithfulness all around you?

[2 : 17] You rule the raging of the sea. When its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass. You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

The heavens are yours. The earth also is yours. The world and all that is in it, you have founded them. The north and the south, you have created them.

Tabor and Herman joyously praise your name. You have a mighty arm. Strong is your hand. High your right hand. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne.

Steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face, who exult in your name all the day, and in your righteousness are exalted.

For you are the glory of their strength. By your favor, our horn is exalted. For our shield belongs to the Lord, our King, to the Holy One of Israel.

[3 : 23] The next section, the longest one, is all about what God has said to David, his king. And the key words are, I will, all the way through.

Verse 19. Of old, you spoke in a vision to your godly one, and said, I have granted help to one who is mighty.

I have exalted one chosen from the people. I have found David my servant. With my holy oil I have anointed him, so that my hand shall be established with him.

My arm also shall strengthen him. The enemy shall not outwit him. The wicked shall not humble him. I will crush his foes before him, and strike down those who hate him.

My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him, and in my name shall his horn be exalted. I will set his hand on the sea, and his right hand on the rivers.

[4 : 25] He shall cry to me, You are my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation, and I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.

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 days of the heavens.

If his children forsake my law, and do not walk according to my rules, if they violate my statutes, and do not keep my commandments, then I will punish their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes, but I will not remove from him my steadfast love, or be false to my faithfulness.

I will not violate my covenant, or alter the word that went forth from my lips. Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness, 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.

[5 : 33] A faithful witness in the skies. The next section is about what God has done to David's kingdom, and the key words are, you have.

Verse 38, 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've breached all his walls. You have laid his strongholds in ruins.

All who pass by plunder him. He's become the scorn of his neighbors. You have exalted the right hand of his foes. You have made all his enemies rejoice.

You have also turned back the edge of his sword. And you have not made him stand in battle. You have made his splendor to cease and cast his throne to the ground.

[6 : 34] You've cut short the days of his youth. You've covered him with shame. The last section is Ethan's response to what God has done.

How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? Remember how short my time is.

For what vanity you've created all the children of man. What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol? Lord, where is your steadfast love of old?

Lord, which by your faithfulness you swore to David. Remember, O Lord, how your servants are mocked and how I bear in my heart the insults of all the many nations with which your enemies mock, O Lord, with which they mock the footsteps of your anointed.

Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen. Amen. And our men. Well, this is the word of the Lord. We'll be considering what this passage means just a little later on.

[8 : 04] From time to time, every Christian meets something in life that seriously troubles confidence in God. When something happens that's so unexpected that it makes you wonder about the character of the one who's in control.

Or when something doesn't happen that you think really ought to happen if God is the splendid and merciful and gracious God that he says he is.

Why did you let this happen? Or why did you not answer my prayer for that to happen? These things are very perplexing for real believers.

C.S. Lewis in his book *A Grief Observed* says this of coping with difficulty. Not that I am, I think, in much danger of ceasing to believe in God.

The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him, namely that he doesn't care or he's not involved. The conclusion I dread is not, so there's no God after all, but so this is what God is really like.

[9 : 17] Deceive yourself no longer. Every Christian meets difficulties in life which challenge their view of God's character.

Psalms 89 is a great example of that sort of difficulty and that sort of challenge. Please turn to it if you're not there already. Before we look at this psalm, let me introduce you briefly to the characters in the drama.

There are three main characters. First, the central character is the Lord God, the steadfastly loving and promise-keeping God. His character is described in this psalm at great length.

The second character is David, the king of Israel. He's mentioned first in verse 3. Various terms are used for him. God's holy one, God's servant, God's firstborn, God's anointed.

David became king of Israel about 1000 BC. That's 3000 years ago. He was a great king. And the promise-keeping God made a great promise to this great king.

[10 : 32] More of that promise in a moment. For the moment, let's note that he was so great a king. And the promise that God made to him was so great a promise that in this psalm, the name David stands for the whole nation of Israel more than 400 years after David the man has died.

That's the second character. The third character is the author, Ethan the Ezraite. We don't know much about this man. From the psalm, he seems to be living more than 400 years after David has died, at a point where disaster has struck the great king's great nation.

The enemy Babylon has marched in, conquered the city of Jerusalem, deported large chunks of the population, and brought the hopes of David's once great kingdom to ruin.

It is a very bad time indeed. And the badness of the time Ethan lives in makes him wonder what on earth God is doing.

A great kingdom. Great promises from the promise-keeping God attached to this kingdom and total disaster faces him. And the great cry of the psalm is verse 46.

[12 : 01] How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long, you promise-keeping and faithful God? How long are you going to appear to be doing absolutely nothing about the promises you've made to David?

Now, this evening, we're going to be examining the terrible tension that exists between the promises that God has made and the way things are.

And of course, this is an issue not confined to the times of Ethan the Ezraite. For if you know anything about the great things that God has promised, you will know that this world as it is and the things that happen in your life are nothing like what God has said he is working towards.

At many different levels, this world is full of cries of pain. And God's people are not immune from those cries. In fact, being one of God's people sometimes makes the bad things of this life much worse.

You know who God is. You know his expressed love for his people. And things happen that seem to make him look inactive and unconcerned for you.

[13 : 25] What do you do with that? How do you manage that? If you were an atheist, it wouldn't be nearly so troubling. It wouldn't be nice to have bad things happen to you. But in a random universe, there is no expectation whatever of anything better than random things happening to you.

But this is the world of the promise-keeping God. And so believers ask from time to time, how long, O Lord?

Will you hide yourself forever? What are you doing here? What we're going to learn is that this is not just a cry of pain in the heat of the moment.

It's not just an emotional outburst. It's a carefully considered question. Thoughtful, deliberate. And we're going to learn that Ethan the psalm writer is not naive.

He's not ignorant of the real reasons for the disaster that has come on the nation of Israel. At one level, he knows only too well why these things have happened.

[14 : 29] And yet, how long, O Lord? Where is your steadfast love? Is still the prayer he prays.

Now, what we're going to do now is look quickly through the psalm.

I'll make one or two observations as we go. And then we'll reflect on the psalm as a whole. We're going to go quickly. So if you're nodding off because it's a warm evening, now is the time to prod yourself or your neighbor.

Attention is needed. Section 1 to 4, verses 1 to 4, in praise of God's steadfast love. I will sing of the steadfast love of the Lord forever.

With my mouth, I will make known your faithfulness to all generations. The introduction is all about God's faithful love. He's very confident that God's faithful love will be sung about forever.

Why is he confident about that? Well, it's not just because of what he knows about God. It's because of what God has promised about his king. Verse 3, You have said, I have made a covenant with my chosen one.

[15 : 42] I've sworn to David, my servant, I will establish your offspring forever and build your throne for all generations. Now, guys, there's a link that we probably don't get here.

What is the link, verse 2, between Ethan's confidence that steadfast love will be built up forever and God's promise, verse 3, that David's dynasty will be built forever.

What is the link between those? Well, for the link, please turn back to Psalm 2. Finger in Psalm 89, turn back to Psalm 2, right at the beginning of the book of the Psalms.

In many ways, Psalm 2 sets the scene for the whole book. Psalm 2 deals with the hostility of the world. Towards God's loving rule.

Let me read verses 1 and 2. Why do the nations rage and the people's plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his

anointed, saying, Let's burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.

[16:56] There's the hostility of the world towards God's loving rule. And it deals with God's response to that hostility. God's response is, verse 6, to set up his own king.

As for me, says God, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill. The rulers of the world oppose God's loving rule. In response, God sets up his own ruler to rule the world for him.

Love is going to triumph because God's king is going to reign in God's world. Now, back to Psalm 89. Why is Ethan confident that God's steadfast love will be sung about forever?

Because, verse 3, God has promised to establish his king forever. God's king is going to reign. God's love is going to triumph.

People will sing about it forever. Now, the next bit of the Psalm, verse 5 onwards, is all about the God who made this great promise.

[18:05] Verse 5, Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones. For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord?

Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord? The point of this quite long section is simply this. The God who has made this promise about his king is not some weedy little pathetic can't quite qualify from the group stages kind of deity.

He is the supreme God. Verse 6, There's no one like him. Verse 8, He's supremely powerful. Verse 9 and 10, He's the defeater of chaos and evil.

Verses 11 to 13, He's the creator of everything. Everything is His possession. Verse 14, He is thoroughly righteous and just, loving and faithful.

And therefore, verse 15 to 18, how amazing it is to be one of His people. The God who made these promises about His king, He is the God.

[19:17] There's no one like Him. So, what about those promises He's made to King David? What exactly has He said?

In verses 19 to 37, we get God's words about His king. This is the longest section of the psalm. The key word is I.

I have done this. I will do this, says God. Verse 19, I have exalted my king. Verse 22 to 23, I will conquer the enemies of my king.

Verse 24, I will love him with steadfast love. Verses 25 to 28, I will make him rule the world. And the longest section, verses 29 to 37, His rule will last forever.

Look at verse 29. I will establish His offspring forever and His throne as the days of the heavens.

[20:25] Look at the end of this little section, verse 37. Sorry, verse 36, His offspring shall endure forever. His throne as long as the sun, like the moon, it shall be established forever.

This king is going to reign forever. forever. That's how splendid He is. Now, there is something we have to note here.

This section borrows extensively from the chapter of the Bible where God makes this promise to David. 2 Samuel chapter 7, if you want some bedtime reading, look it up when you go home and you'll find the promise in 2 Samuel chapter 7 is echoed very strongly here.

Something we need to note and it's verse 30. If David's children forsake my law and do not walk according to my rules, if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments, then I will punish their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes.

Remember, we've been told that the rule of God's king is going to last forever and yet, verse 30, when God made this promise to David of an eternal dynasty, he knew that David's descendants would not be ideal kings and he promised punishment if they disobeyed and as Ethan writes this psalm, he knows that Israel's situation conquered by Babylon is the result of David's descendants' unfaithfulness to God.

[22:07] But he also knows, verse 33, but I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness.

I will not violate my covenant or alter the word that went forth from my lips. Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness, I will not lie to David.

His offspring shall endure forever, his throne as long as the sun before me. God's promise has been that despite the disobedience of David's descendants, his plan for a king to rule the world will never, ever fall over.

Ethan knows why things are bad, because God's judgment has fallen. But he also knows that God's promise is bigger than that. The trouble is, the way things look at the moment, it seems as though

God has indeed stopped being faithful to his promises.

Everything about the current situation looks like a denial of God's promises. The previous section is God's words, I will, I will, I will.

[23 : 31] Verse 38 following is all, you have, you have, you have. And, says Ethan, the things you've done are not, are not the things you said you would do, God.

What has God done to David? Well, instead of establishing David, verse 38, you have cast him off and rejected him. Instead of your steadfast love being with him, verse 38, you are full of wrath against your anointed.

You promised God not to violate the covenant you've made with David, but, verse 39, you have renounced the covenant with your servant. You promised that you'd crush his foes before him, but, verse 40, you've made him lose.

You promised that his enemies would not outwit him, but, verse 42, you have exalted the right hand of his foes. You've made his enemies win instead of him.

You promised that his throne would endure as long as the sun and moon, but, verse 44 and 45, you have ruined his kingdom. You, oh God, have cast his throne to the ground.

[24 : 52] You've done it. Verse 46, do you see why he says this? How long, oh Lord? How long are you going to do that for?

How long is that going to go on? Now, folks, do you get the sense of this? Do you get the tension here? Imagine interviewing Ethan on television for life beyond the Babylonian invasion.

Ethan, this is a terrible disaster. You're a believer in the God of Israel, aren't you? Well, yes I am.

This must surely have taken you by surprise. Well, no, not really.

You see, God said to David that if our kings didn't obey him, things would turn out badly, and they have. They've turned out exactly the way he said he would. So you're saying that God has kept his promises. Well, yes he has.

Let's just get the record straight here. You are saying that God has kept his covenant with David, are you? Well, no, he hasn't. That's what's going on here.

[25 : 58] Has God been faithful? Well, yes and no. You see, this psalm is not naive about sin. God has done what he said he would.

He's punished the disobedience of David's descendants. But, where is the steadfast love? Where is the faithfulness? Where is the power? Where is the might?

Where is this kingdom? It's been flattened to the ground. Where is that great, big, fat, rich promise of an eternal kingdom to overcome the wickedness of the world's anti-God rule?

Where is it? You've not done it, says Ethan. In fact, it looks as though you've abandoned your program. How long, oh Lord, are you going to let that persist?

Has God kept his covenant promises? Absolutely yes, and absolutely not yet. That's the tension of this psalm.

[27 : 02] Just about everything that's visible about God's conquering king has been obliterated by the Babylonians. You've done what you said you would do, but you've not done what you said you would do.

How long till you do something about that? That's the heartbeat of this psalm. And folks, it's not just here that that kind of tension exists.

It exists all the way through the Bible in different ways, and it is always a recurring theme in the life of believers. Have you kept your promises? Yes and no.

Yes and no. Let's reflect on this for a few minutes. It would be so easy to be embarrassed by difficult events like this.

I called this sermon When God Doesn't Keep His Promises. I wonder if you found that title difficult.

A couple of people have already said this evening how they found the title difficult.

[28 : 10] You can't call a sermon When God Doesn't Keep His Promises because God always keeps His promises. Well, let me say that Ethan, the author of this psalm, has no such embarrassment. Is God faithful?

Absolutely. Has He been faithful to His covenant to David? Not properly yet He hasn't. Verse 39, You have renounced the covenant with your servant.

That's how it seems to me on the ground. He says at the same time, God is always faithful, but this isn't it yet.

Now, let me say it is a great relief that this psalm is in the Bible because it means that God is not embarrassed by that kind of tension.

Consider for a moment how embarrassed our politicians are when faced with the reality that they have not done what they said they would do.

[29 : 11] It's common enough, isn't it, in almost every interview somebody brings that up, even though they're only human and everyone knows that it's not always possible for human beings to do what they want to do because unexpected things come up or because they're just not powerful enough to pull it off.

Have you ever heard a politician say yeah we didn't do what we said we would stuff came up. Have you ever heard anybody say that? Wouldn't it be a great relief to hear somebody say that in an interview on the news someday I'd vote for that person immediately didn't matter what they stood for because at least there's a degree of honesty and humility there but they find it too embarrassing God is not embarrassed by a human being saying look I know you're faithful but you seriously haven't done it yet how long are we going to have to wait friends this is enormously refreshing it means that God is not pretending about the realities of life and that means that God's people don't have to pretend about the realities of life's difficulties either he's faithful but we haven't seen it yet let me point out three things that God is thoroughly unembarrassed about from this psalm first God is thoroughly unembarrassed about the fact that he sometimes looks unfaithful consider the one to whom these promises ultimately refer these promises of course look forward to the perfect king to Jesus consider how Jesus looked for a while everywhere he went sickness and death overcome evil conquered messed up lives straightened out sins forgiven abusive authority bravely challenged and then he is unjustly convicted and murdered and it looked such a disaster so much so that some of his disciples after the event said he was a prophet mighty in deed and word we had hoped that he was the one to redeem

Israel but it doesn't look like he is now did it look at the point of Jesus crucifixion as though God had been faithful to his king it did not look like that they thought the whole thing was over and that he couldn't possibly be the promised king after all now let me say that there is a uniqueness about the events dealt with in this psalm and about the events surrounding the life and death of Jesus however there is something that is generally true here every real believer who lives in this world age and takes God's word seriously meets yes and knows about whether God has kept his promises has he yes and no it's so often the answer that's the way it is in this present world order is God a faithful God absolutely he is is he well sometimes it looks exactly the opposite of that God is unembarrassed by that he is big enough to manage that we don't always see why God does and doesn't do things in fact there are many many instances in which we haven't got a clue why God does and doesn't do things but he is unembarrassed by that reality and we do not need to be embarrassed by that reality either he is big enough to deal with it second thing he's unembarrassed by he's unembarrassed by the fact that his actions make life hard for his people the time that Ethan is writing in is not a good time but there were faithful people around like the writer of this psalm and the truth is that what God has done has made life very difficult for this psalm writer and he's not afraid to talk to

[33 : 44] God about that twice in the last section he talks he tells God to remember things verse 47 remember how short my time is for what vanity you've created all the children of man what man can live and never see death who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol Lord where is your steadfast love of old which by your faithfulness you swore to David which I think being translated means something like this look I'm not here for long life is short I'm waiting to do what you've said you'll do for David when I'm dead I won't be able to see that happening when are you going to get on with your promises it's how your servants are mocked and how I bear in my heart the insults of all the many nations with which your enemies mock oh Lord with which they mock the footsteps of your anointed people are mocking your people because our

God hasn't delivered he says to his God I'm having to carry the can for what you haven't done God knows that the way he does things makes life difficult do you think God is indifferent to the unjust sufferings of his people all over the world do you think he thinks that is a kind of accident something that he's not really thinking about he's forgotten about when things are hard for you it is not that God hasn't noticed it is not because he's a deceiver it is not because he doesn't care it is not because he lacks power to do something about it how long oh Lord is a normal thing for a believer to have to say I wonder if that's a prayer you're embarrassed by or confident enough to speak

God is a faithful God well how long oh Lord are you going to let this continue God knows that his actions make life hard for his people he's not afraid to admit it that's why this psalm is in the Bible third thing he's unembarrassed about God is unembarrassed about the fact that his actions spoil his own reputation sometimes in difficulty Christians resort understandably to saying things like well that happened because of human sin or the devil did that it's wickedness or that happened because of the way the fallen world is and of course there's truth in all of those all the time one could argue that all of those factors were involved in the difficulties of life in Ethan's time is human sin involved in the Babylonian invasion too right it is on both sides is supernatural evil involved in the Babylonian invasion absolutely it is does the fallenness of the created order play a part in the sufferings certainly it does but none of those are focused on by the writer of this psalm verse 38 you have verse 39 you have you have verse 40 you have done it verse 42 you have you have verse 43 you have done this sovereign

God faithful God you've done it what we find it difficult to do sometimes is to affirm that God is thoroughly in control of the difficulties that his people experience we like to keep God's reputation clean and shiny we say things like well God allowed it to happen as though God is kind of at a distance from the thing that he's allowed to happen but such answers tend to be unsatisfactory for they make God seem either uninvolved or uncaring or too weak to stop it from happening Ethan's having none of that you've done it all he says to God how long are you going to keep doing it it's God who's done this fundamentally not anyone else and the flip side of that is verses 50 to 51 remember oh Lord how your servants are marked your reputation is in the gutter because of what you've allowed to happen how long will you tolerate that he says you did it

God knows that his actions the way he does things spoil his reputation in the world he is not embarrassed about that and neither should his people be our time is gone it's a long psalm it's a big issue let me summarize God sometimes seems properly unfaithful his actions sometimes make life very hard for his people his actions spoil his reputation in the world it is a tremendous relief to have this psalm in the Bible because it means we don't have to pretend about the way things are it's really like this is God a faithful God absolutely can we see his faithfulness all the time absolutely not sometimes quite the opposite two practical things to close when difficulty comes to people we need to do more than acknowledge

[39 : 54] God's faithfulness now it's right to acknowledge God's faithfulness our friend is in difficulty we encourage them to believe that God is faithful and in control and that's right and true but we need also to acknowledge the reality of promises not delivered yet this psalm is full of God is faithful God is faithful God is faithful and then there's a big strong how long oh Lord will you let this appearance of unfaithfulness go on it doesn't help people just to hear that God is faithful they need also to hear yeah but it isn't all worked out yet second can I say when difficulty comes to you it does not help to distance God from it do you notice all the way through this psalm he addresses

God as God is and this psalm is a really good model for how to deal with those terrible tensions of yes he's faithful but I don't see it look at the things he does first he rehearses what he knows about God's character at length he reminds himself of all the things that are true about God don't neglect to do that sometimes it's easy to be overwhelmed by the how long of the situation don't neglect to remind yourself of God's faithfulness second thing he does he affirms that God is thoroughly in the driving seat in this situation you have you have you have done it you're in control I know you are and the third thing he does is he prays and the start and end of his prayers in different ways affirms his confidence in

God 46 is a great affirmation of confidence in God how long will you hide yourself forever I know this isn't all you've promised how long and so is the last verse 52 blessed be the Lord forever he ends the psalm where he starts God's faithfulness will be praised forever because God will in the end totally deliver on what he's promised let's pray together how long oh Lord will you hide yourself forever let's just have a moment in the quiet to respond to what

God has said to us and then I'll lead us in prayer our gracious God we thank you for the wonderful realism of this psalm we thank you for its steady affirmation of the fact that you are faithful full of steadfast love just righteous absolutely powerful and steady the controller of everything the ruler of all we thank you that these things are true about you we thank you also for the realism of this cry how long oh lord we acknowledge that so often in our lives we are simply unable to join up the truth we know about you with the things we experience we acknowledge that that has been part of the way this world is all the way through in these words 3,000 years ago in the crucifixion of the lord

jesus christ 2,000 years ago in the life of every believer since then the great gulf between what is true about you and how things appear help us when we face difficulty to do what the psalmist does to remind ourselves of your faithfulness and to face head on the reality of your appearing unfaithfulness us help us to depend on you help us to be of comfort to others in difficulty we thank you that you will be blessed forever your faithfulness will endure forever in the end your love will be seen to reign everywhere help us to look forward to that day to pray with confidence for its coming hear us in
Jesus name we pray amen