

When God Breaks Promises

Psalm 89

Turn to Psalm 89 please. I wonder if anyone came here this morning wondering how to tell God that he's not keeping his promises. That's what Psalm 89 does.

Do you have that kind of disappointment with God in your life? I certainly do. They would mostly fall into the category of unanswered prayers. I've asked for things that God does in Scripture. And there are strong statements in the Bible promising answers to our prayer. If prayer comes from people of faith, he will answer it, a mountain will be thrown into the sea.

But God is not doing that. Some people say, "Yes, God is answering, he just saying 'not now my child' or something like that." The faithful Israelites who wrote the lament psalms had no interest answers like that. They said it like this: "Why, God, are you not answering my prayer? How long will you ignore me?"

Today is the last lament psalm we'll do in this Psalms series, so before we get to Psalm 89 I want to talk about the theology of these complaining psalms. Next Sunday we'll do a confident encouraging psalm, so everything will end happy just like it is supposed to. But we're more used to that than to this, so let's talk about these painful psalms, then to Psalm 89.

The Theology of the Complaining Psalms

"Lament" is a peculiar word, not something we use in normal life, "complaining" is what we really mean. The lament psalms tell us that godly men and women regularly have long severe troubles of all kinds. The lament psalms tell us that we should complain to God about this.

Complain respectfully, and complain to God. Make God responsible for this. He hears the prayer, and he takes responsibility. He could deliver us, but he is not. Say all this to God. The lament psalms tell us to keep trusting God, put faith in God, serve God, he has not left us.

And the lament psalms make all this a part of group worship. Together we come to God around these problems, and God calls it worship.

There are three other ways that Christians handle disappointment with God and with life: fatalism, deism, and triumphalism. These labels are not quite accurate, but they will do for now.

"Fatalism" sees troubles as the will of God, it is "fate," and it cannot be helped, nothing can be done, this is just the way God rules the world. God says this or that will happen, and it will happen, nothing can stop it.

Fatalism is right in seeing God involved, as often in the Psalms and the Bible. But the lament psalms refuse to accept that. “You are the powerful God, and you faithfully care for your people, but you are not acting like it. I’m one of your people but you are not helping; this is not right!”

Lament psalms say: “This IS happening in the way you rule the world, God. But it is not like you, and it should NOT be happening. Have mercy and help us.” Definitely not fatalist.

“Deism” is the distant God. God is not really involved. Good things happen to me and to us, bad things happen to me and to us, that is just how the world is, God is not really involved. That is another way to handle the contradiction between who we understand God to be, on the one hand, and on the other hand the apparently random hard stories of the world and in our lives.

The Psalms have no interest in this. God is involved in the individual lives of his people, for good and for bad. Every Israelite sang these about themselves, and so can we.

Psalm 22: “My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?”
Psalm 23: “The LORD is my shepherd, I have all I need. He leads me by still waters.” God is bound up with our individual lives. Both of those lines take a lot of faith. My natural tendency is to a mild form of deism, but the Bible wants no part of that.

“Triumphalism” has faith in God’s goodness and his involvement with us, so much so that if there are troubles, then they are our fault. If we had enough faith, and lived obediently, then God would rescue us. God always wants to free us from these things, and if he does not it is our fault. If we were more faithful, more devout, more obedient, God would rescue us.

Again, the lament psalms have no interest in this. Confession of sin is rare in these complaining psalms. This is the third severe lament we’ve gone over (44, 88, 89), and in none of them does the prayer even hint at sin or lack of faith causing the trouble.

They pray as faithful Israelites who suffer because God has led them into distress, and why will he not have mercy and rescue them. God’s faithful people can have long severe troubles without doubting themselves. (In Hebrews 11:32-40, the faith that brings miracles, and the faith that perseveres in troubles, are the same faith.)

Summary: The lament psalms tell us that godly men and women regularly have long severe testings of all kinds. The lament psalms tell us that we should complain to God about this.

Complain reverently, and complain to God. Make God responsible for this. He hears the prayer, and he takes responsibility. Tell God he could deliver us, but he isn’t. He wants us to pray like this. These psalms tell us to keep trusting God, serve God, he has not left us, he will yet rescue.

And the lament psalms make all this a part of group worship. We come together to God around these problems, and God calls it worship, because it takes real faith in him to pray this way.

Now to Psalm 89. It is a long psalm, and divides fairly accurately into thirds. The first third of the psalm praises God because of his loyal love (*hesed*) and because of his faithfulness. These are the very things the psalm later tells God he has ignored.

God's eternal power and faithfulness (Ps 89:1-18)

- Ps 89:1 *I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.*
- ² *I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.*
- ³ *You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant,*
- ⁴ *'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.'"*
- ⁵ *The heavens praise your wonders, Lord, your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.*
- ⁶ *For who in the skies above can compare with the Lord? Who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings?*
- ⁷ *In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him.*
- ⁸ *Who is like you, Lord God Almighty? You, Lord, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you.*
- ⁹ *You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.*
- ¹⁰ *You crushed Rahab [poetic name for Egypt] like one of the slain; with your strong arm you scattered your enemies.*
- ¹¹ *The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it.*
- ¹² *You created the north and the south; Tabor and Hermon sing for joy at your name.*
- ¹³ *Your arm is endowed with power; your hand is strong, your right hand exalted.*
- ¹⁴ *Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love + faithfulness go before you.*
- ¹⁵ *Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, Lord.*
- ¹⁶ *They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness.*
- ¹⁷ *For you are their glory and strength, and by your favor you exalt our horn.*
- ¹⁸ *Indeed, our shield belongs to the Lord, our king to the Holy One of Israel.*

God's Promise to His People: David's Line Will Rule Forever (Ps 89:19-37)

About 1000 years before Christ, God spoke to David through the prophet Nathan, and told David that his descendants would rule over God's people forever. That story is in 2 Samuel 7. This second third of the psalm is a poetic paraphrase of what God told David back then.

In 2 Samuel, God spoke directly to David. In this paraphrase, God is saying it to all his faithful people. But composer of this psalm knows what 2 Samuel 7 says, and God really did say this.

- ¹⁹ *Once you spoke in a vision, to your faithful people you said: "I have bestowed strength on a warrior; I have raised up a young man from among the people.*

- ²⁰ *I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him.*
²¹ *My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him.*
²² *The enemy will not get the better of him; the wicked will not oppress him.*
²³ *I will crush his foes before him and strike down his adversaries.*
²⁴ *My faithful love will be with him, and through my name his horn will be exalted.*
²⁵ *I will set his hand over the sea, his right hand over the rivers.*
²⁶ *He will call out to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.’*
²⁷ *And I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.*
²⁸ *I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail.*
²⁹ *I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure.*
³⁰ *“If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes,*
³¹ *if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands,*
³² *I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging;*
³³ *but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness.*
³⁴ *I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered.*
³⁵ *Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—and I will not lie to David—*
³⁶ *that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun;*
³⁷ *it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky.”*

God, You Broke Your Promise (Ps 89:38-45)

About 400 years after God make that promise, the Babylonians came and conquered Jerusalem. Jehoichin was king then, the descendant of David, 18 years old, and he walked in chains to Babylon. It seems that the psalmist might even have seen it. The last third of the psalm responds to what the Babylonians did. Don’t miss how completely the psalm holds God responsible.

- ³⁸ *But you have rejected, you have spurned, you have been very angry with your anointed one.*
³⁹ *You have renounced the covenant with your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust.*
⁴⁰ *You have broken through all his walls and reduced his strongholds to ruins.*
⁴¹ *All who pass by have plundered him; he has become the scorn of his neighbors.*
⁴² *You have exalted the right hand of his foes; you have made all his enemies rejoice.*
⁴³ *Indeed, you have turned back the edge of his sword and have not supported him in battle.*
⁴⁴ *You have put an end to his splendor and cast his throne to the ground.*
⁴⁵ *You have cut short the days of his youth; you have covered him with a mantle of shame.*

God, Remember your Love and Faithfulness, and Keep your Promise (vv46-51)

- ⁴⁶ *How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?*
⁴⁷ *Remember how fleeting is my life. For what futility you have created all humanity!*
⁴⁸ *Who can live and not see death, or who can escape the power of the grave?*
⁴⁹ *Lord, where is your former great love, which in your faithfulness you swore to David?*
⁵⁰ *Remember, Lord, how your servant has been mocked,*

*how I bear in my heart the taunts of all the nations,
51 the taunts with which your enemies, Lord, have mocked,
with which they have mocked every step of your anointed one.*

52 Praise be to the Lord forever! Amen and Amen.

Verse 52 is probably not part of the original psalm. There is a very ancient division of the Psalms into five books, Ps 89 is the end of the third of the five. The first three books end with just this line.

So this is how the psalm ends: ⁴⁹ *Lord, where is your former great love, which in your faithfulness you swore to David?* ⁵⁰ *Remember, Lord, how your servant has been mocked, how I bear in my heart the taunts of all the nations,* ⁵¹ *the taunts with which your enemies, Lord, have mocked, with which they have mocked every step of your anointed one.*

So, if we were going to tell God he had broken a promise, what could we learn here?

Boldness of vv38-45. In these lines, God was entirely responsible for what happened to David's descendants. It was not the sinning king, nor his advisors, nor the Babylonians. It was God.

The psalmist does not say, "it seems to me that you abandoned David's line, but I could be wrong" or "forgive me for saying this, but you are not keeping your promise." The psalm assumes directly language is the right thing: "You said you would never take your love from David's line, but you did. You said you would always support David's line, but you have not."

The psalm is completely direct about the gap between God's promise and his actions. And all this after singing the praises of God's faithfulness, and his love that lasts forever.

Reverence of vv38-45. The psalm does not insult God, never speaks against his character, never says, "we can't trust you at all." The psalm never takes back what's in the first part of the psalm, God's faithfulness and his love that lasts forever.

This prayer expresses whole-hearted confidence in God's faithfulness and love. If we will take the end of the psalm at face value, let's also take the beginning that way. The psalm teaches two things, and there is a painful gap between them.

On the one hand, God's word and character are completely reliable, and his love lasts forever. On the other hand, God is not doing what he clearly said he would do. The psalm holds on to both, does not back off on either one.

The psalm does NOT say, "since God is faithful and loving, what happened to David's line is not what I think it is." Nor does it say, "Since God turned against David's line, God's love and faithfulness are not what I thought they were."

There is a big tension between the two, and the psalm does not try to fix it. It is God's job to fix it. The psalm ends appealing again to God's compassion, and do what he promised.

This psalm could be summarized in four short sentences: You are faithful and loving. You made a promise. You broke your promise. Remember your promise.

God likes this psalm. When it was composed, God said to himself, "That's good, that's a keeper, I want my people to worship me like that, I'm going to put that in my book so my people will use that again and again."

Respond to God. If we are not bringing the painful things of our lives to God, why not? What else could God say to encourage us to do that? What kind of a God would give us a prayer like this, where we respectfully tell him that he is an honest God and that he has not kept his word?

This is what kind of God: a God for whom the worst thing that could happen is that we'd stay away from him. God says, "If this is what you have to say to me, then don't stay away from me, come to me and say it." And it is actually a part of group worship. Amen.

Father, whose throne is the heavens and whose footstool the earth, we know that you are faithful, and that your love endures forever. But we have things in our lives that do not fit with that. We doubt ourselves too much to say you broke your promise, but that does occur to us. How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? Remember how short our lives are. Who can live and not see death, who can escape the grave? Remember your promises to us, and look at our frailty. Show us your love and your faithfulness. You are our only hope.

One more thing, Father: Jesus, son of David, is your answer to Psalm 89. You did remember your promise to David, and sent Jesus your Son. We have put our trust and hope in him, for he will save his people. We thank you and praise you for remembering your promise. Amen.