

Psalms 88 and 89 are extreme prayers. Together they form a provocative sequence to bring Book III to a sober and unsettling end. Psalm 88 is a deeply personal lament on death and dying and Psalm 89 is a passionate public lament on God's covenant love and the future of faithfulness. If Friedrich Nietzsche had considered these psalms he might have thought twice about his charge that believers are naive. The intensity of the psalmist's quest for answers in the face of death and silence echo Job on the ash heap crying out, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). These psalms recall Jacob's all-night wrestling match as he clung to God, saying, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gen 32:26). These two psalms explore the sharp edge between hope and hopelessness with a resilient faith that is not afraid to speak to God boldly. They invoke the memory of Jesus in Gethsemane, praying, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Implicit in the Spirit's inspiration is a messianic yearning for the new life that is beyond death and for the new covenant that lasts forever.

Psalm 89 may be unusually long given the singularity of the tension running through the psalm. Two-thirds of the psalm establishes the great faithfulness of the Lord whose steadfast covenant love establishes creation and the Davidic covenant *forever* (Ps 89:1-37). The final one third laments the undoing of everything promised by the Lord. The people of God and the anointed one are rejected, defiled, plundered, scorned, and ashamed (Ps 89:38-51). The sharp contrast between "Great is Thy Faithfulness" and "Great is Thy Faithlessness" is shocking and inexplicable. The psalm closes with the people of God taunted by all the nations and mocked by their enemies. The psalm is long, but it is impossible to break it up and still deliver its intended message. The tension in the text leads to the passion of the passage. The tension in Psalm 89 between the everlasting promise of the Lord's love and faithfulness and the painful present experience of futility and shame cannot be ignored. If the psalm is divided up into positive and negative sermons the meaning is lost.

Creation and Covenant

*I will sing of the Lord's great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known
through all generations.
I will declare that your love stands firm forever,
that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself.
You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant,
'I will establish your line forever
and make your throne firm through all generations.'"
The heavens praise your wonders, Lord,
your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.
For who in the skies above can compare with the Lord?
Who is like the Lord among the heavenly beings?*

*In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared;
 he is more awesome than all who surround him.
 Who is like you, Lord God Almighty?
 You, Lord, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you.
 You rule over the surging sea;
 when its waves mount up, you still them.
 You crushed Rahab like one of the slain;
 with your strong arm you scattered your enemies.
 The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth;
 you founded the world and all that is in it.
 You created the north and south;
 Tabor and Hermon sing for joy at your name.
 Your arm is endowed with power;
 your hand is strong, your right hand exalted.*

Psalm 89:1-13

There is no hint in the first section that a powerful lament is coming. Ethan the Ezrahite sets the story of the Lord's great love to music.¹ Everything is positive, from the highest heavens to the smallest child. He is eager to sing praise and to declare truth in concert with creation and the heavenly hosts. These opening verses inspired James Fillmore to write the popular twentieth century hymn "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever," but it was Lord's covenant promises to David (2 Samuel 7:5-16) that inspired the psalmist to see God's great faithfulness to creation and the house of David. He stresses the "foreverness" of God's covenant promises to David whose throne is established "firm through all generations" (Ps 89:4). The privilege of relationship ("my chosen one") and the purpose of responsibility ("my servant") are united in a single everlasting calling.

The psalmist focuses on the Lord's "truthfulness" or "faithfulness" (Ps 89:1, 2, 5, 8, 14, 24, 33, 49). Goldingay translates 'ê^mûnâ as "truthfulness" whereas the NIV and ESV use "faithfulness."² *Hesed* is also repeated seven times and is translated "commitment" or "steadfast love" or "great love," or "faithful love" (Ps 89:1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49). In each of these references it is the Lord's truthfulness, faithfulness, great love, and commitment that is being praised. These powerful attributes cannot be defined any further than the perfection of truth, faithfulness, love, and commitment. This highly relational understanding of the Lord is what the psalmist praises. They are on full display in the heavens above and on the earth below. No one compares to the Lord. God is sovereign over creation and David's throne. The heavens praise the Lord's wonders and "the assembly of the holy ones" praise his faithfulness (see Job 1-2). All of creation, including the hosts of angels, offer reverent and exuberant praise to God.³

¹ In 1 Kings 4:31, Solomon is said to be wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite and Heman (Ps 88). Both names are referenced in 1 Chronicles 2:6 as sons of Zerah from the tribe of Judah and identified as temple musicians in 1 Chronicles 15:17, 19.

² Goldingay, *Psalms*, 668.

³ The Bible consistently refers to angels, not as flighty cherub-like creatures, but as behind-the-scenes messengers on a mission. They worship God, reveal his will, and do his bidding. The basic assumption that angels play a strategic role in the drama of salvation history is undebatable. Distinguished scientist Edward O. Wilson stretches credulity when he encourages belief in extraterrestrial beings. He writes, "The meaning of human existence is best understood in perspective, by comparing our species with other conceivable life-forms and, by deduction, even those that might exist outside the Solar System." Wilson

Next, the psalmist features the chaos of nature and nations. The “surging sea” is ruled by God and brought under control and enemies like Rahab, a nickname for Egypt (Isaiah 51:9-10), are crushed and scattered. The whole cosmos belongs to the Lord. The heavens are his; the earth is his. He founded the world and created north, south, east and west. “You own the cosmos – you made everything in it, everything from atom to archangel. You positioned the North and South Poles; the mountains Tabor and Hermon sing duets to you” (Ps 89:11-12, The Message). The psalmist’s praise is on the same page as the apostle’s praise, when Paul says, “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:16-17).

Righteousness and Justice

*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
love and faithfulness go before you.
Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you,
who walk in the light of your presence, Lord.
They rejoice in your name all day long;
they celebrate your righteousness.
For you are their glory and strength,
and by your favor you exalt our horn.
Indeed, our shield belongs to the Lord,
our king to the Holy One of Israel.*

Psalm 89:14-18

This five verse bridge between the celebration of the Lord’s power in creation and the Lord’s covenant faithfulness to his anointed one David is especially significant in the light of Jesus’ teaching. The psalmist revels in the moral character revealed in and through the Lord’s rule: righteousness, justice, love, and faithfulness. These life-giving, life-transforming, divine attributes correspond beautifully to Jesus’ teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus may have had in mind the psalmist’s blessing as he began his sermon with the Beatitudes (Ps 89:15).

“Righteousness” is not a stodgy, stuffy religious word, but a comprehensive, powerful word that embraces justification by faith in Christ, personal holiness, the work of sanctification, and the pursuit of social justice in every sphere of life. “It would be a mistake to suppose,” writes John Stott, “that the biblical word ‘righteousness’ means only a right relationship with God on the one hand and a moral righteousness of character and conduct on the other. For biblical righteousness is more than a private and personal affair; it includes social righteousness as well. And social righteousness, as we learn from the law and the prophets, is concerned with seeking a man’s liberation from oppression, together with the promotion of civil rights, justice in the law courts, integrity in business dealings and honor in home and family affairs. Thus Christians are

believes that God is an “idol of the mind” and faith is a product of “the biological evolution of human instinct,” but he also believes in the plausible existence of aliens. If one of the world’s most distinguished evolutionary biologist can write convincingly about aliens, perhaps Christians should believe confidently in what the Bible says about angels.

committed to hunger for righteousness in the whole human community as something pleasing to God.”⁴

The way of righteousness, justice, love and faithfulness resonates with Jesus’ understanding of heart righteousness. Believers learn to acclaim the Lord, walk in his light, and rejoice in his righteousness. Jesus taught that true righteousness was not an imposed obligation, but a joyful privilege flowing out of a covenant relationship. The joyful description of the believer walking in the light of the Lord’s presence, rejoicing in his name all day long, and celebrating his righteousness, is for God’s great glory and our great good. The psalmist closes out this bridge by referencing the king and the promise of God’s favor. Righteousness exalts the king and strengthens his “horn,” a symbol of power and might. Justice, love, and faithfulness establishes the king as the people’s “shield,” a symbol of sovereignty, and demonstrates tangibly that the king belongs to the Lord, the Holy One of Israel.

Faithfulness Forever

*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 among the people.
I have found David my servant;
with my sacred oil I have anointed him.
My hand will sustain him;
surely my arm will strengthen him.
The enemy will not get the better of him;
the wicked will not oppress him
I will crush his foes before him
and strike down his adversaries.
My faithful love will be with him,
and through my name his horn will be exalted.
I will set his hand over the sea,
his right hand over the rivers.
He will call out to me, ‘You are my Father,
my God, the Rock my Savior.’
And I will appoint him to be my firstborn,
the most exalted of the kings of the earth.
I will maintain my love to him forever,
and my covenant with him will never fail.
I will establish his line forever,
his throne as long as the heavens endure.*

*“If his sons forsake my law
and do not follow my statutes,*

⁴ John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, 45.

*if they violate my decrees
and fail to keep my commands,
I will punish their sin with the rod,
their iniquity with flogging;
but I will not take my love from him,
nor will I betray my faithfulness.
I will not violate my covenant
or alter what my lips have uttered.
Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness –
and I will not lie to David –
that this line will continue forever
and his throne endure before me like the sun;
it will be established forever like the moon,
the faithful witness in the sky.”*

Psalm 89:19-37

The question addressed decisively in this section is not what David can do for the Lord, but what the Lord will do for David. Life is not measured by what is achieved for God but by what is received from God. The Lord used some fourteen first person “I” statements in Psalm 89:13-37 to describe his actions on behalf of his anointed one. The same number of “I” statements is used in 2 Samuel 7:8-16 to explain what the Lord will do for his beloved people and for David. The thrust of the message is the same for prophet and psalmist alike, David is not a self-made man. The Lord made David who he is and gave him everything he has. The Lord gave him strength, raised him up, anointed him and crushed his foes. The Lord established David’s reign over the sea and over the rivers and promised that his covenant with David would never fail. Even when David’s sons and future generations are disobedient and faithless, the Lord declares, “I will not take my love from, nor will I betray my faithfulness. . . .I will not lie to David. . .” (Ps 89:33, 35).

The relationship between the Lord and David is so special that it goes beyond David to the future Son of David of whom David said, “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’” (Ps 110:1). David calls on the Lord, saying, “You are my Father, my God, my Rock my Savior” and David is designated as the Lord’s “firstborn,” one who is exalted above all the kings of the earth (Ps 89:27; Ps 2:7). For hundreds of years it appeared that these glowing promises of eternal reign to David and his heirs were hyperbole. Israel was an oppressed and beleaguered people who returned from exile to repopulate and rebuild their land under threat from the world’s superpowers. It looked like the line of David had reached its end and these glorious prophecies were only faint hints of past glory. But then something miraculous happened that changed the course of history, “God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town of Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.” God picked up the thin thread of salvation history and made good on his promises to the house of David. Gabriel said to Mary, “You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:26-33).

How Long?

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

*How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?
Remember how fleeting is my life.
For what futility you have created humanity!
Who can live and not set death,
or who can escape the power of the grave?
Lord, where is your former great love,
which in your faithfulness you swore to David?
Remember, Lord, how your servant has been mocked,
how I bear in my heart the taunts of all the nations,
the taunts with which your enemies, Lord, have mocked,
with which they have mocked every step of your anointed one.*

Psalm 89:38-51

The lengthy description of God's great faithfulness, his enduring truthfulness and everlasting covenant love, is suddenly and without warning countered in a stark description of utter rejection. Like a bolt of lightning coming out of nowhere, the psalmist paints a picture of total disaster and devastation. Derek Kidner writes, "Either the unclouded praise of verses 1-37 was a miracle of self-discipline, if it was composed in this situation, or else it was drawn from an existing psalm to strike a positive note (by a different exercise of self-discipline) before the unburdening of grief which now ensues."⁵ Now we begin to see why Psalm 88, the somber psalm on death, is linked to Psalm 89, the sober psalm of rejection.

The psalmist refused to spend any time on secondary causes. The cause of this devastation is not

⁵ Kidner, *Psalms*, 324.

credited to the apostasy of the northern kingdom nor to the idol worshiping kings of Judah. Babylon's king Nebuchadnezzar is not blamed for the fall of Jerusalem (2 Kings 24). To be sure, enemies and foes and the power of the sword are factors in this tragic lament, but the psalmist insists that it is the Lord who bears primary responsibility. "But you," the psalmist cries. "You have rejected . . . You have spurned . . . and you have been very angry with your anointed one." The verbs of judgment and rejection pile up on one another: *You have renounced the covenant / defiled the crown / broken down your anointed one's defenses / reduced the city to ruins / exalted the enemy / made the enemy rejoice / supported the enemy in battle / put an end to your anointed one's splendor / cut short the days of his youth / and covered him with shame.* The celebration of God's great faithfulness becomes an intense, painful lament of God's great faithlessness. But the psalmist does not blame God for his apparent faithlessness and abandonment. He does not judge God's absence nihilistically. He does not give himself over to despair. Implicit in the psalmist's lament is an earnest and lively commitment to the sovereignty of God over all creation, over all history, over the people of God, and over everyone. This lament is not an accusation of despair as much as an expectation of deliverance. There are no grounds for optimism, but every reason to hope.

The psalmist does not ask, "Why?" He does not ask why precisely because of the message of the prophets and conviction of the psalmists. He has a firm grip on Israel's history of apostasy and idolatry. He knows why divine judgment has fallen on the people of God; why the crown has been defiled and why Israel's enemies have had the upper hand. Instead of asking why, he asks, "How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?" It is not a question of whether God will fulfill his covenant but of when. He appeals to the Lord for action because of the brevity and futility of life. Unless the Lord shows his great love and faithfulness there is no reason for hope. As the Lord's anointed one he asks the Lord to remember how fleeting is his life. He pleads with the Lord to be mindful of his persecution. He has been mocked and taunted by his enemies. "They have mocked every step of your anointed one" (Ps 89:51).

The trajectory of salvation history leads downward to the manger. We remember that God called Abraham out of nowhere to make of him a great nation. Under the patriarchs, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the family grew. Then, famine led the Israelites into four hundred years of Egyptian bondage. The first Exodus was glorious. The Israelites escaped from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and were led through the wilderness by Moses and Joshua into the Promised Land. The stories of Deborah, Gideon, and Ruth, led us to Kings Saul and David. Here, Israel is at its height. David's son Solomon begins the descent.

We find it more difficult to follow Israel's history when the kingdom is divided between Jeroboam's Israel in the north and Rehoboam's Judah in the south. Against a litany of bad kings, Elijah and Elisha keep Israel's history alive. From there the story-line belongs to the prophets. Their ministry, from Joel to Malachi, spans 400 long years. Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah and Jeremiah tried to turn the hearts of the people to God. Embedded in their message is the story of the coming Messiah, but few grasped the promised hope and few honored the faithfulness of God with obedience and devotion. God judges his people and sends them into exile. The Babylonian captivity runs for 70 years. Habakkuk, Daniel, Ezekiel, Obadiah,

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, cover this period. This is where Nehemiah and Ezra come in as well.

The first Exodus was powerful. God's ten plagues, the Passover meal, and the solidarity of the people of Israel leaving Egypt in mass, crossing the Red Sea on dry ground, feeding on manna in the wilderness, and receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, all add up to a spectacular defining moment. But the second Exodus from Babylon was nothing by comparison. Israel trekked back to their homeland as refugees. We remember the first Exodus, but few of us know much about the second Exodus. Nehemiah and Ezra describe a beleaguered people, barely hanging on. When the temple was rebuilt, those who remembered the glory days under Solomon and the first temple, cried, because they were disappointed. Malachi's cry for faithfulness is the last word in this downward trajectory, followed by 400 years of silence. The people of God, through whom God designed to bless all the nations, was taken down to rock bottom. The descent of the Messiah was preceded by the descent of the people of God.

It is not difficult to imagine Jesus, the Son of David, the anointed one, praying these words as he suffered the taunts and mockery of religious and political power-brokers. The people of God were living in the state of rejection described by the psalmist and their only hope was in a deliverer who took up their pain and bore their suffering. "Yet he was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain" (Isa 53:3). The power of the psalm to capture the movement of history that led to the cross cannot be credited to authorial intent but it can be credited to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The psalmist did not know how the covenant-keeping Lord of truthfulness and faithfulness would keep his promises to the house of David and to the people of God. He did not know how the rejection and humiliation would be borne by the Son of David. Who ever imagined that the Lord of Glory would become the Crucified God? The anointed one "made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil 2:7-8).

Doxology

Praise be to the Lord forever!

Amen and Amen.

Psalm 89:52

Book III of Jesus' Prayer Book ends in doxology (Ps 41:13; 72:19; 106:48; 150:6). If the psalmist praised the Lord for his truthfulness, faithfulness, steadfast love, and commitment, how much more should we? When we sing of the mercies of the Lord we cannot help but think of Jesus the Christ and praise the Lord.