

Honest to God – Tough Questions from the Psalms (Part 7 of 8)

“Where is Your Steadfast Love?”

Psalm 89

Mark Vroegop

¹ I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations. ² For I said, “Steadfast love will be built up forever; in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness.” ³ You have said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: ⁴ ‘I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations.’” ⁵ Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones! ⁶ For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD, ⁷ a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him? ⁸ O LORD God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O LORD, with your faithfulness all around you? (Psalm 89:1–8)

⁴⁶ How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? ⁴⁷ Remember how short my time is! For what vanity you have created all the children of man! ⁴⁸ What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol? ⁴⁹ Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David? ⁵⁰ Remember, O Lord, how your servants are mocked, and how I bear in my heart the insults of all the many nations, ⁵¹ with which your enemies mock, O LORD, with which they mock the footsteps of your anointed. ⁵² Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen (Psalm 89:46–52).

How many times have you prayed, “Lord, show me your will”? My guess is that you, like I, have prayed that prayer many, many times. Discerning the plan of God is understandably something every believer would want and desire. Who wouldn’t want to know God’s plan so that they could follow His path of blessing and approval?

But there is a tension here, isn’t there? Knowing and living under God’s will can be very challenging at times. There are moments in our lives when we wonder what in the world God is doing. There are situations, circumstances, and events that are confusing and conflicting. And you might be left wondering “How does this fit into God’s plans?” Ever been there? I’m sure you have.

I call this moment “the dark side of God’s will.” By this I mean those moments when you are in the orbit of God’s will, but for a moment, you are in a place in which the warm glow of His promise-keeping grace is eclipsed by difficulty, confusion, and pain. Being on the dark side of God’s will doesn’t change the certainty of the providential orbit or the real presence of the promise-filled sun. Yet, the eclipse creates an environment that feels dark, cold, and lonely. You know that one day the sun will shine again, but it seems like a long way off when you are on the dark side of God’s will. When you are in this season, you need a psalm like Psalm 89.

Psalm 89: “A Dark Side Psalm”

This is the longest psalm that we have examined in our study on the hard questions in the psalms. That is important only in the sense that I find it very interesting how much time is devoted to wrestling with all the dynamics that are involved here. Living in the dark side is complicated. There are no quick fixes, answers are not easy, and emotions run high.

I am grateful that this kind of psalm is in the Bible. I’m thankful that the psalmist says “Where is your steadfast love?” It is helpful because it shows us that dark-side moments are a part of life. Like a friend who’s “been there, done that,” it just helps that someone feels our pain. But even more, this psalm gives us a way forward, a way to think, when God’s will is confusing and dim.

Intentional Praise (vv 1-4)

You may notice that just below the editorially supplied title, and before the start of the psalm, is an explanation: A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite. Apparently this psalm was written by a man named Ethan who belonged to the tribe of Levi. According to 1 Kings 4:31, Ethan was renowned for his wisdom, since Solomon was described as being even wiser than him, and psalms like these were designed to be teaching tools. In fact that is what Maskil means: a song that teaches. Therefore, this psalm is a song designed to communicate a particular message.

Now this creates a bit of a problem, because Ethan lived during the Unified Monarch Period – the days of David and Solomon. As you will see later, the psalm, beginning in verse 38, laments the destruction of the Davidic Dynasty. Two solutions are offered: 1) The original psalm was verses 1-37, and then additional verses added in a different period, or 2) It is ascribed to Ethan’s choirs that developed and became well-known over time.

The point is simply that this is a psalm with a very intentional purpose – to teach people how to think and live in the midst of challenging circumstances.

The psalm begins with very specific and intentional praise. The upward focus is clear and obvious. But the praise is not about God in general; it centers on the key theme of the **Davidic Covenant**. Listen for the phrase “steadfast love,” and the theme of covenant that emerges.

¹ I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations. ² For I said, “Steadfast love will be built up forever; in the heavens you will establish your faithfulness.” ³ You have said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: ⁴ I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations’ ” Selah Psalm 89:1–4 (ESV).

David was a very special man to God, described as “a man after God’s own heart.” His rule of Israel was really considered the glory days of the nation. Solomon had more wealth and power, but David brought the nation together in heart and soul.

Additionally, he had a special relationship with God and was given a stunning promise in 2 Samuel 7 when David considered building a temple. God would not allow David to do that, but instead He made a covenant promise to him:

12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, 15 but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16 And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:12–16).

This promise essentially is that Israel will one day be ruled by a descendant of David whose reign will be established forever. Embedded in this covenant are important words like “build” and “establish” and “steadfast love,” words which we hear very clearly in the first four verses of Psalm 89. The parallels are intentional.

The psalmist is intentionally recounting the promise of God. At this point just note this: the psalmist is intentionally praising God. You will see later why this is so important.

Exulting in Who God Is (vv 5-18)

Beyond the dynamic of intentional praise, the psalm shifts to a very intense focus on who God is. He moves from general praise to very specific statements of adoration which highlight different aspects of God’s greatness. When you put verses 5-18 together, it is an amazing list of effulgent exaltation. The psalmist lavishes God with praise.

He begins with a focus on **God’s majesty**, a greatness that is other-worldly. God deserves praise from the heavens (v 5), the angels (“holy ones” – v 5), the skies (v 6), and the heavenly beings (v 6) because He is “awesome above all who are around him” (v 7). No one is greater than God, and no one is more faithful (v 8).

5 Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones! 6 For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD, 7 a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him? 8 O LORD God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O LORD, with your faithfulness all around you? (Psalm 89:5–8).

The exaltation then turns to **God’s might** as has been seen in history. The sea, which is the most “formidable and unpredictable part of man’s environment” is something that only God can rule and still (v 9).¹ Great nations are nothing to Him (v 10). “Rahab” is a nickname for Egypt (see Isaiah 51:9ff). God owns all of creation (v 11) and it praises Him (v 12). God is mighty (v 13).

¹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150 – Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1975), 321.

⁸ O LORD God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O LORD, with your faithfulness all around you? ⁹ You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. ¹⁰ You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. ¹¹ The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them. ¹² The north and the south, you have created them; Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name. ¹³ You have a mighty arm; strong is your hand, high your right hand (Psalm 89:8–13).

Finally, the psalmist exults in **God's superior morality**. Righteousness, justice, steadfast love, and faithfulness are all a part of God's reign (v 14). Blessing comes to those who are under God's reign (v 15) and who benefit from his righteousness (v 16). The moral perfection of God, especially His holiness, is an empowering and protective covering for God's people (vv 17-18).

⁸ O LORD God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O LORD, with your faithfulness all around you? ⁹ You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. ¹⁰ You crushed Rahab like a carcass; you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. ¹¹ The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them. ¹² The north and the south, you have created them; Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name. ¹³ You have a mighty arm; strong is your hand, high your right hand (Psalm 89:8–13).

The psalmist is reminding his own heart about the beauty of who God is. He is recounting the character of God and anchoring his soul to the reality of what God is like. Through history and what he knows to be true about God, he points his heart that direction.

By the way, this is one of the major reasons that we love the psalms so much. They help stoke the fires of our hearts through God-centered adoration. They lift us beyond our circumstances and limited view of life, and they help us behold the beauty of God.

Rehearsing the Promises of God (vv 19-37)

What happens next in the psalm is really amazing. The covenant with David that was hinted at in the first few verses is now brought out front and center. The psalmist, from multiple angles, identifies the beautiful promises that God had given to David and to His people through this Davidic Covenant.

For the sake of time, and because the passage is quite clear on its own, let's just read the entire section. And as we do, listen for the personal nature of this covenant and the hope that is embedded in it. It is rich with affection, compassion, and promise.

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. ²⁰ I have found David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him, ²¹ so that my hand shall be established with him; my arm also shall strengthen him. ²² The enemy shall not outwit him; the wicked shall not humble him. ²³ I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. ²⁴ My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him, and in my name shall his horn be exalted. ²⁵ I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers. ²⁶ He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my

salvation.’ 27 And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. 28 My steadfast love I will keep for him forever, and my covenant will stand firm for him. 29 I will establish his offspring forever and his throne as the days of the heavens. 30 If his children forsake my law and do not walk according to my rules, 31 if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments, 32 then I will punish their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes, 33 but I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness. 34 I will not violate my covenant or alter the word that went forth from my lips. 35 Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. 36 His offspring shall endure forever, his throne as long as the sun before me. 37 Like the moon it shall be established forever, a faithful witness in the sky.” Selah (Psalm 89:19–37).

Did you hear how sure and hopeful the psalmist is? Now if you ended the psalm here, it would be a great and natural place to stop. This may have been the stopping point at one time in Israel’s history. The message would be all about praising the character of God and rejoicing in His promises. It would have been a good psalm.

But it doesn’t stop there. In fact, the psalm takes a hard left turn; you can almost hear the “screeches” as you move from verse 37 to verse 38.

A Covenant Eclipsed² (vv 38-45)

The next section is filled with an incredible amount of pain, confusion, and devastation. We are not entirely sure where this psalm fits in biblical history, but it is likely reflecting on the time that we talked about last week. This was during the time that Israel was taken captive by Babylon. The king at the time was Zedekiah, the third son of the great reforming king named Josiah.

The Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem for eighteen months, with unspeakable horrors happening inside the city walls. After Jerusalem was conquered and plundered, they murdered the children of Zedekiah in front of him, put out his eyes, and carried him in chains to Babylon, where he remained a prisoner until his death. Eventually the Babylonians returned and completely razed the city of Jerusalem. All that was left were a few fields and the poor (Jer. 52:16).

Your king is a blind captive. Your great city is plundered and decimated. The Temple is completely demolished. This is the dark side of God’s will. The promises of God that sounded so precious and personal are a long way off now!

Verses 38-45 are filled with a lot of pain, but I want you to notice how much of it is directed at God. Look at how many times the word “you” appears – thirteen times! It is not that the psalmist is angry with God (I think that would be sinful). Instead, he is deeply wrestling with what he knows to be true about God in contrast to what is happening. He knows that God is ultimately behind all of this, and he cannot reconcile this with the promises of God.

This is the hard part about being on the dark side of God’s will. You know that God is faithful; you know that He keeps His promises; you know that He is always good. But there are times when the

² I’m grateful for Derek Kidner’s phrase here in his commentary.

twin realities of God's promises and life's pain do not line up well. It feels as if God has rejected His people, violating His steadfast love.

38 But now you have cast off and rejected; you are full of wrath against your anointed. 39 You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust (Psalm 89:38–39).

There are strong words here: “cast off,” “rejected,” “full of wrath,” “renounced the covenant,” and “defiled his crown.” In the English these have a definite and permanent sound to them. But they should not be taken this way. In fact, the NIV and NRSV use “spurned your covenant” to catch this nuance.

This section concludes with a recounting of the difficulties that they are experiencing, hardships which do not immediately make sense in light of God's covenantal promises.

40 You have breached all his walls; you have laid his strongholds in ruins. 41 All who pass by plunder 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 You have also turned back the edge of his sword, and you have not made him stand in battle. 44 You have made his splendor to cease and cast his throne to the ground. 45 You have cut short the days of his youth; you have covered him with shame. Selah (Psalm 89:40–45).

The end product is a situation that is quite difficult to stomach. On the one hand, God is majestic and steadfast in His love. But on the other hand, there are moments when it seriously feels as if God has broken His promise.

Have you ever been there? I sure have. Our family has. I don't know that I've ever told this story publicly, but it fits too well. After the still birth of our daughter in 2004, we had a number of early miscarriages, and our greatest fear was that we would not have any more children. Finally, we had a pregnancy that seemed to take, and we were scheduled for our first ultra-sound. The blood work had confirmed that we were indeed pregnant, but our doctor wanted to confirm it. When he put the ultrasound wand on my wife's tummy, he had a very troubled look – a look with which we were all too familiar. He said, “I don't know how to tell you this, but you have a blighted ovum. There is a gestational sac present, thus the positive readings, but no baby.” You can only imagine how crushed we were. We sat in the car absolutely stunned, and we talked about the fact that while we knew that God wasn't mean, it sure felt like it at that moment. And a week later when I sat all alone in a surgical waiting room during a procedure to remove the blighted ovum, I remember feeling more lonely than I'd ever felt before. The promises of God felt very, very far away. The covenant of God felt eclipsed.

Please Remember! (vv 46-52)

So where do you go in moments like this? How do you live through the dark side of God's will? By going back to God and His promises. You return, rehearse, and plead with God to remember His promises. Your appeal is not to remind God; it is to remind yourself of the promises of God.

Notice how prevalent is the crying out to the Lord and the appeal for Him to remember. Once again we see the helpful cry of “How Long, O Lord?” and where it leads. This question can be “as fruitful and it is painful.”³

⁴⁶ How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? ⁴⁷ Remember how short my time is! For what vanity you have created all the children of man! ⁴⁸ What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol? Selah ⁴⁹ Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David? ⁵⁰ Remember, O Lord, how your servants are mocked, and how I bear in my heart the insults of all the many nations, ⁵¹ with which your enemies mock, O LORD, with which they mock the footsteps of your anointed (Psalm 89:46–51).

The appeal here is based upon the psalmist’s understanding of who God is. Therefore, he anchors himself, not to a change of circumstances, but to God’s ability to be God. He appeals to His compassion (v 47), His historical acts (v 48), His sense of justice (v 50), and His previous promises (v 51). His hope is not in “why?” or in “when?” but in “who?”

And notice where he ends. Oh, this is incredible! After all that we have heard in this psalm, after the roller coaster of emotions of promises made, but circumstances that are so disappointing, now we hear the most beautiful cry. In the midst of the pitch darkness and cold uncertainty that comes with the dark side of God’s will, the psalmist says, “Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.” He chooses to bless!

The psalmist echoes Job 1:21 – “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” This is the hope of Psalm 89: that in the midst of great confusion and wrestling with God’s will, you could still bless the Lord.

Lessons for Dark Side Moments

In light of what we have seen in this Psalm, let me give you a few concluding thoughts. Perhaps these can serve to help you when you find yourself in dark-side orbit of God’s will.

1. Don’t trust your feelings

There are moments in life when every one of us will ask, “God, what are you doing?”, “Where are you right now?” and “How long O Lord?” These questions, asked in honest pain, not sinful anger, are normal and part of the content of the Bible. So being spiritual doesn’t mean that you never feel abandoned or never struggle. But in the midst of that struggle you need to clearly distinguish between what you feel very deeply and what is true. You can feel abandoned without actually being abandoned.

³ Kidner, 325.

2. Cling to God's promises

The essence of what it means to be a Christian is that you believe God's promises. You become a follower of Jesus by believing what God's word says about you, your sin, and forgiveness through Jesus. Faith is not just what you do in conversion; it is what you embrace every day of your life – especially when you are on the dark side of God's will. Preach the promises of God to your soul. Sing them. Pray them. Cherish them. Rehearse them. And keep doing this until the dawn comes.

3. Ask God for help

By this I don't just mean help to deal with the circumstances. I mean that you pray that God would help you to keep believing, to keep clinging to His promises. It is the prayer of Psalm 86:11 – "unite my heart to fear your name." It is pleading with God for heaven-sent perseverance. It is a commitment to keep trusting the One who keeps us trusting.

4. Choose to bless

Living through a dark side experience requires a choice – a daily, faith-birthed, promise-believing decision. It is the choice to bless the Lord even when things are hard. Job's wife crumbled under the weight of pain, while Job said, "Shall we receive good from God and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10). His question is really important. Are we only in this "God-thing" because of the benefits? Job made his pain a platform for worship. And that is what you can do today – to choose to bless the Lord even while things are hard.

5. Consider Jesus

As New Testament believers we know the final story of Psalm 89. God did keep His promise to David. There is, and forever will be, a descendent of David who reigns as king. But the path to his reign was not what we would have expected, nor was it something that always made sense. What's more, Jesus endured the dark side of God's will, accomplished the plan for redemption, and lives as a constant reminder that God always keeps His promises. Thus, Hebrews 12 says, "Consider Him . . . so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Heb. 12:3).

When you see the dark side of God's will this way, it changes everything. It does something beautiful – something only God could do: it makes the dark-side moments one of the greatest and most intimate times with God that you will ever have.

You discover that while it is really dark, God is still there.

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